WORLDS OF TOMORROW

Spring, 1971
MAC 75¢

SCIENCE FICTION

SUMMONS TO THE MEDICMAT

novella by
Sydney Van Scyoc

EPIC

William Rotsler

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Anthony Boucher Memorial Anthology of Fantasy and Science Fiction

As editor, writer, critic and friend, Anthony Boucher affected the lives of a considerable number of people. When he died in 1968, some of them decided to create a unique memorial—twin anthologies of the kinds of stories he had been most closely identified with. Beagle Books is proud to publish the paperback reprints of these anthologies, beginning with SPECIAL WONDER.

Vol. 1: Stories by Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, R. Bretnor, Grendel Briarton, Fredric Brown, John Brunner, Doris Pitkin Buck, Mildred Clingerman, Avram Davidson, Jon De Cles, Miriam Allen DeFord, Richard Deming, Gordon R. Dickson, Harlan Ellison, Philip José Farmer.

Vol. 2: Stories by Horace B. Fyfe, Randall Garrett, Damon Knight, Kris Neville, William F. Nolan, Alan E. Nourse, Chad Oliver, Mack Reynolds, Margaret St. Clair, Howard Schoenfeld, Robert Silverberg, Jack Vance, Richard Wilson.

We will also publish shortly the companion anthology, CRIMES AND MISFORTUNES, containing stories by Queen, Stout, Carr, and twenty-six other top mystery writers. Like SPECIAL WONDER, it will appear in two volumes.

95¢ each wherever paperback books are sold.

The Beagle science fiction and fantasy list also includes:

The Arkham Edition of H. P. Lovecraft
THE TOMB AND OTHER TALES, AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS, THE LURKING FEAR, THE LURKER AT THE THRESHOLD

Lady Cynthia Asquith, ed.
THE SECOND GHOST BOOK, THE THIRD GHOST BOOK

Edward Wellen
HIJACK

Beagle Books An Intext Publisher
101 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WORLDS OF TOMORROW

SCIENCE FICTION
•
ALL STORIES NEW

Issue 26
Vol. 5, No. 3
Spring, 1971

EJLER JAKOBSSON
Editor

JUDY-LYNN BENJAMIN
Managing Editor

FRANC L. ROGGERI
Art Director

JACK GAUGHAN
Associate Art Director

JAY TUNICK
Circulation Director

LAWRENCE C. MURPHY
Subscription Director

•

ARNOLD E. ABRAMSON
Publisher

BERNARD WILLIAMS
Associate Publisher

WORLDS OF TOMORROW is published by UPD Publishing Corporation, a subsidiary of Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation, Arnold E. Abramson, President. Main offices: 235 East 45 Street, New York, New York 10017. 75¢ per copy. Newsstand only. Copyright © 1971 by UPD Publishing Corporation under international, Universal and Pan-American Copyright conventions. All rights reserved. The publisher assumes no responsibility for the return of unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Title registered in U.S. Patent Office. Printed in U.S.A.

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

SUMMONS TO THE MEDICMAT .. 6
Sydney Van Scyoc

EPIC 102
William Rotsler

SHORT STORIES

PERFECT MATCH 53
Roger Dee

ON VENUS THE LIGHTNING PRECEDES THE THUNDER 60
David Duncan

HOLD MY HAND, MY LOVE 72
Michael G. Coney

BOY ON THE STAIRS 91
Dale E. Randles, Jr.

THE SWITCHER 123
Robert Wells

PRINCE OF THE CAPTIVITY .. 139
Daphne Castell

THAT OTHER DIMENSION 148
M. G. Ogan

THE AGENT 156
Richard Hill

WAITING IN CROUCHED HALLS 164
Ed Bryant

HEART OF THE GIANT 176
Larry Eisenberg

FEATURE

VISIONS AND NIGHTMARES 2
Lester del Rey

Cover by GAUGHAN, suggested by SUMMONS TO THE MEDICMAT

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

visions and NIGHTMARES

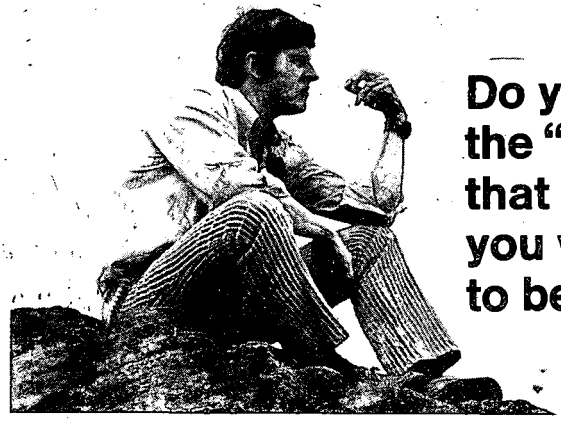
LESTER DEL REY

IT HAS never been the job of science fiction to foretell the future accurately, though we've had a few lucky hits from all our mining of the worlds and times of possibility. I began a book once, in the early fifties with: "When Major Armstrong was the first man to set foot on the Moon . . ." I got the date wrong by five years and most other details wholly wrong. No matter, if the readers enjoyed the tale and found that it somehow conveyed the *feeling* of a future.

Until recently, however, it seemed to be generally agreed that science fiction had to present a reasonably convincing picture of what some aspect of some future might be. That meant the details relating to the story had to be correlated and fitted into a well thought pattern; and that for the length of that story, the reader should be able to accept it. We were essentially future oriented, and we weren't reading fiction about tomorrow to learn from our writers the facts about today that could better be had from a newspaper.

I think most readers still turn to our fiction for something be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Do you have the "faults" that could mean you were born to be a writer?

Writers usually hate to be "labeled," but there's no denying most of them share certain characteristics. They're dreamers. Loners. Bookworms. Too impractical, intense, idealistic. If you have "faults" like these, remember they may be the most creative parts of your personality. They could be a clear indication of a gift.

If you have such a gift, make the most of it. Hours you may be spending in time-killing diversions could be spent in *productive* recreation. In the writer's world, you can let your imagination roam free, doing what comes naturally to you.

A unique writing school

But where do you begin? It's really very simple—we teach; you learn. Here at Famous Writers School, we've created a truly unusual writing program that comes to you—right in your home. The program shortens the years of trial-and-error; helps you avoid the failures of so many beginning writers. It's more like a shared adventure than a course.

You get individualized training

All of our instructors are working editors or writers, who *know* what editors are looking for. While an instructor is working on your manuscript, he gives it his full attention. And when you get it back, you'll find the kind of line-by-line editing established writers get from their own editors—plus a detailed letter of suggestions. No one can promise success. But with training like this, our students have sold to over 700 publications.

Think about it. Could you convert your "faults" into a gift for writing? Find out by sending for our free Aptitude Test. We'll evaluate it and return it to you without charge or obligation.

FW

An educational service of FAS International

Famous Writers School
Dept. W-5227, Westport Connecticut 06880

I want to know if I have writing aptitude worth developing. Please mail me without obligation, your Aptitude Test and illustrated brochure.

Mr.
Mrs. ..... Age .....
Miss [Circle one and please print]

Street .....

City .....

State ..... Zip .....

Accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yond the horizons we know—for a glimpse of other ways and other means, for a glimpse ahead, beyond the narrow tunnel of statistical prediction that science can give us; and for a different view of man's destiny than can be learned from the transitory, now-centered fads and feuds that always seem so important in the tiny little universe of this minute. We cannot and do not demand accurate vision, but we have the right to ask for clear vision that will bring alien worlds and alien times to come to us in ways we can accept.

Since the future may be marvelous at certain times and horrible at others, some of our future visions must necessarily be nightmares. But to be a nightmare for us, it should still be a vision—a seeing through the eye of a cogent mind, not a mere sensation of horror bereft of all form and consistency.

Hence, in this column, I shall concentrate mostly on those works that merit more attention to their far-seeing and clear-seeing than to their other and more generalized literary value. I don't intend to discuss Shakespeare's *Tempest* for its science-fiction value, though that could be done.

NO MAN has been quite as consistent in bringing us fully detailed and deeply considered stories based on possible worlds as Hal Clement. This may be partly because writing is still a hobby with him, after thirty years, and he refuses to write a story until he has worked out all the science in it. His novels are "hard science fiction," which simply means that almost everything from plot to background depends on a unified extrapolation of real science. His *Mission of Gravity* may well be the finest example of such "hard" writing in the fields; at least, I think so.

But even his novels of lesser reputation are a joy to read for anyone who enjoys beautifully integrated developments and careful attention to every detail. Fortunately, while these have been hard to locate recently, *Cycle of Fire* and *Close to Critical* have just been reissued by Ballantine Books at 75¢ per copy.

Close to Critical (like *Mission of Gravity*) takes place on a truly alien planet which men have just begun to explore. This is a world where nothing is even remotely stable. At night, the "air" is unbreathable, even to the natives, who must await each day in a state of suspended animation. Because there are eight hundred atmos-

(Please turn to page 188)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fred Hoyle & Geoffrey Hoyle

ROCKETS IN URSA MAJOR

One of the world's leading astrophysicists, who is also a peerless author of science fiction [*The Black Cloud*], collaborates with his son on a chilling story of Earth's cosmic battle against a virtually omnipotent alien power. $4.95

INDOCTRINAIRE

by Christopher Priest

In the 22nd century, a young scientist at work in a laboratory beneath the Antarctic ice struggles to prevent a nuclear war in South America—the last habitable area on earth. "Remarkably interesting ...a splendid development of suspense."
—ALAN E. NOURSE $5.95

THE MIRROR OF INFINITY

Edited by Robert Silverberg

This superb anthology of science fiction pairs 13 outstanding s-f stories with provocative comments by 13 noted critics. Among the authors: Isaac Asimov, Jorge Luis Borges, Robert A. Heinlein. Among the critics: Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Damon Knight. "Recommended."—*Library Journal*. $6.95

AT ALL BOOKSTORES, or from

Harper & Row 49 East 33d Street, New York, N.Y. 10016

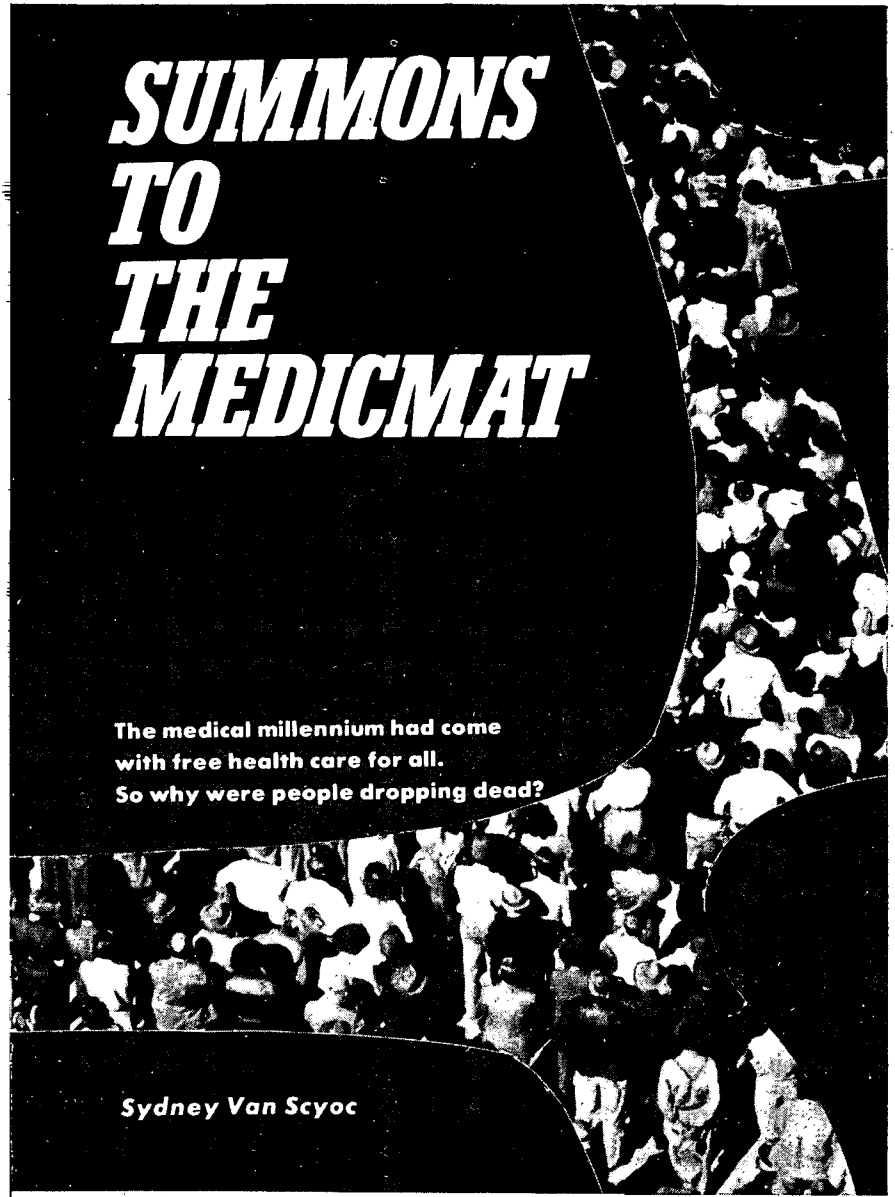
1817

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUMMONS TO THE MEDICMAT

The medical millennium had come with free health care for all. So why were people dropping dead?



Sydney Van Scyoc

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I

NOON, and the lenses of Borrel Behric's eyes were filled with Wall Fourteen, towering luminous expanse lit with myriad shifting pinpoints which reflected the traffic of pedestrian units across Control Area Fourteen. Within the partitions of Control Cube 23D, Borrel's eyes, intent, interpreted the shifting patterns of light. His hands, deft, performed the constant small adjustments that kept pedestrians moving evenly along the sliding walkways of Sector 23D.

He glanced down briefly, then up, and his eyes, darting, found congestion forming in his lower left quadrant. With one hand, he readjusted stripwalk speeds in the quadrant. With the other, he punched Information.

"Twenty-three requests dining data."

Tersely, the speaker disgorged data. The two dining complexes located in the affected quadrant had already filled to capacity. Three other complexes, scattered, were approaching capacity. The two last, both situated in the upper right quadrant, remained under-utilized.

Borrel frowned. With undue irritation, he keyed the information to the marquees mounted above the three main stripwalk avenues that crossed 23D and to the message poles planted beside the hundred minor walks that laced it. With his idle hand, he activated his one dormant strip, moved it rapidly toward the upper right.

Pinpoints drifted from the barely formed cloud of congestion. A streamer brightened along the freshly activated stripwalk. Gradually pedestrian pressure eased in the quadrant.

Relaxing, Borrel let his gaze range beyond the boundaries of 23D.

A heavy traffic knot approached his sector from his upper right. He reared back, stared at the knot with rising anger.

Sparks!

Sparks gossiping on the buzz line again. Ignoring his responsibility to dissolve the knot. Sparks depending upon Behric to bleed the knot instead, as usual, quietly, without registering complaint.

Sparks in for a surprise this time.

Fiercely, Borrel hit the hot button and, simultaneously, the complaint button.

"Twenty-four E! Twenty-four E, you have a massive concentration drifting! *Repeat*, you—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Too late. The knot was already crossing.

Clamping his molars, Borrel set to his controls. With a savage slash, he reversed an eastbound, set it speeding west. He glowered across the entire Wall, then keyed a Sector 22 southbound out of dormancy and, on a hunch, reversed a northeaster, set it southwest at top speed. He flashed warnings across miles of towering marquees.

Almost dizzily, the knot whirled away to south and west.

It was nearly dissipated when he became aware of the shrill buzzing. Startled, he slapped at his wristlog, silencing the alarm. He stared at the time dial.

Six hours.

His concentration broken, he swam to awareness of the familiar tightness at the base of his neck, of the bony ache that infected his lower skull and ventured out along his jawbone. He raised his shoulders, dropped his head back and rolled it, attempting to ease the tension of back, shoulders and neck.

Six hours he had worked the board. Six hours since he had had units.

Standing, steadying himself with one hand, he signed out.

Then he stood in the doorway, swaying on the brink of the corridor, anxiously attempting to accommodate the threatening dimension of depth after six hours of broad, flat Wall. He stretched one hand into the void of the corridor, followed it cautiously, the back of his neck hard with tension.

Ominously, Sparks appeared from the neighboring cubicle, loomed shadowless in the dim corridor. His oxblood hair grew across his massive skull in glossy, crawling waves. Bright freckles stood out from the ruddy flesh of cheek and jaw. A mole jutted aggressively from the point of his chin. "Going out for your morning dose, Behric?"

ANOTHER time, Borrel's reply might have been concise and clear. But standing now with the frightening chasm of the corridor opening before him, with his last units six hours behind, he let his voice fall into the void, carrying his muttered reply with it.

"Hear about the web failure on Wall Seven?" Sparks' second question carried the force of grudge.

"I—didn't."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Arced out half an hour ago. Five disaster teams on it already and more flying from outstate. Casualty reports started coming just a few minutes ago. About the same time you set up the yap about the knot passing." His voice thickened. "You didn't have to use the complaint button, Behric. You could have broken into the buzz line."

Borrel's jaw tightened. "You could have dissolved the knot before it reached my sector."

Sparks expanded, angrily. "Behric, I told you: Seven arced out and took a hundred peds. Or more. Teams flying from everywhere. And I was tuned in. *I was monitoring the buzz line.*"

Borrel did not waver. "Your responsibility was to Twenty-four E, Fourteen, Sparks. Not to your own sense of curiosity."

Sparks' shoulders threatened to burst his plackets. "Behric, did you ever think of transferring to another Wall? If you don't like my style?"

Borrel's palms dampened. "Sparks, did you ever think of taking responsibility for your own knots?"

Sparks inflated. "Did *you* ever think—"

"Operator Sparks," the Wall intoned quietly. "Operator Sparks, please report to Supervision to discuss the complaint entered by Twenty-three D. Operator Sparks, second call."

Sparks' face engorged. His freckles stood against a field of violet. "Behric, if I don't get docked credits on this, I'm going to transfer Walls. And if I do get docked, I'm going to squat right here and shoot knots at you till *you* move." He bared his teeth.

Then the space he had filled was emptied, and he was rumbling through the door into the administrative wing. Borrel tottered on the edge of the vacuum created by his withdrawal. He groped against a wall, steadied himself. Suddenly, silently, the world was exploding, opening out crazily, expanding into dimension beyond impossible dimension.

His heart speeded with frightening realization. He was past due. He had taken his morning units—he remembered now, too late—more than an hour early, hadn't thought to reset his wristlog to compensate, hadn't considered what could happen.

Now it was happening. And he had to get to the medicmat. He had to have his units, or he would expand into the drawing vacuum and disintegrate. He would become only swirling pain in what had once been head, throbbing discomfort in what had formerly been shoulders and back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He slid along the Wall. He reached the exit, passed down to street level. Perspiration slid the line of his jaw and dripped off his chin. The long muscles of his legs quivered.

A pair of narrow stripwalks slid past. Half a mile distant, Borrel could hear the grumble of the main avenue that serviced the traffic control district.

Scuttling crabwise, he boarded the southbound.

The walk slid, and in a moment the local medicmat glimmered ahead, a bubblic transparency landscaped snugly between the narrow stripwalk and the muttering avenue that crawled over the hill.

Quickly Borrel disembarked his walk, caught his balance on the shallow downramp that serviced the medicmat.

Transparent doors zipped open. The lounge was nearly deserted. A stout woman huddled on one padded wallshelf, her hand planted damp on the blue partition a short crawl from the emergency call-button; She wheezed.

Beyond the lounge, a dozen free-standing medicbooths were arranged across a generous crescent of floorspace. Borrel ventured upon the floor. A young woman lurched from the nearer booth and brushed past him, eyes cloudy.

His head ached malignantly. His shoulders cramped. His eyes, darting, found an empty booth. Quickly he ducked to occupy it.

And nearly collided with an emaciated creature who wove hot-eyed toward the same booth. He staggered and fell through the booth door. He sprawled across the bench, his eyes burning from dark, puffed pockets, his hands clawing at the medicard holder mounted on his stained fabric belt.

Shuddering, Borrel shrank away, located another empty.

Weakly, he sank to the bench, his head a painful burden upon his shoulders. Opposite him, the treatment console gleamed. With a shaking hand he fumbled his medicard from its holder. He bared his right forearm and thrust it down the stainless medispray well.

But before he could feed his medicard into the identification slot, he was snapped rigid by a scream that rattled the partitions of the booth and shattered the world.

Without intention, without thought, he was outside the booth, sleeve still rolled, card still clutched. The scream wavered, then rose higher, impossibly higher, stabbing his ears, filling him with electric pain.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The cry fell abruptly to a loud, liquid sob. The door of the booth Borrel had almost entered clattered open, and its occupant arced out, all bone and straining sinew, his spine curved like a bow pulled taut, his head snapped sharply back to give birth to a second high scream. Even his feet were arched. He pirouetted across the floor-space, caromed off the curved skin of the structure, lost balance.

His eyes were opened blindly, bulging. Rolling, he regained his feet, performed a terrible dance around and about the medic-booths. Then his toes took him to the lounge. He staggered against a wallshelf, toppled, hit the floor. His body still arched, he rocked stiffly on his lean, curved belly. Then he relaxed completely.

BORREL was paralyzed on the verge of the lounge, blind and deaf to the gathering curious. He stared at the limp body, at the half-dozen medicards that fell from the purple-clawed hand.

From the side of the lounge, a single voice defined the situation shrilly. "Drugger!"

The man was on his feet again, his eyes popping. Blindly, he lurched against a wallshelf, against a partition, against a door.

Which slid, permitting him to blunder up the black ramp to the sliding stripwalk.

"Drugger! *Drugger*!"

Borrel glanced at the avid faces, heard the affirming murmur and mutter. Without thought, he moved to the exit, pounded up the ramp.

The drugger reached the nearest stripwalk erect. Then his body arched again. His spine cracked, and a loud groan echoed upward from his chest.

He was down, flat across the stripwalk, limp again, totally.

The sliding walk carried him a dozen feet, two. His leg caught against a message pole, and his body was rotated backward, his hands trailing. Smoothly the walk eased to a halt.

Emergency warnings flashed from a dozen traffic poles, and the yellow strip adjacent to the stalled strip accelerated. But Borrell was barely aware of that, or of the turmoil of patrons boiling from the medicmat. His eyes were filled with the fallen man.

Within three minutes the medicteam arrived, riding the hurtling yellow strip stolidly, satchels in hand. They skipped off the strip in tandem and squatted beside the still man. The husky medic lifted one inflamed eyelid, let it drop. The slight one pulled a hand mirror

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and slid it just beneath the jutting nose. The surface remained clear.

Briskly they hit their feet, formed a uniformed barrier between the expired drugger and the massing group from the medicmat and its environs. Two pair of uncompromising eyes swept the group.

One pair fixed on Borrel. "You. Report."

Borrel blinked at him stupidly, trying not to sway into the chasm that was opening between them.

"Report!"

Dizzily, Borrel shook his head. "I came to—to have my—"

"He was drugging! This one, down," a vengeful harpy-voice declared from behind. "I was just clearing my booth when he came screeching up from the back. Having some kind of fit. Fell down, and rolled on the floor, and when he got up, he left a fistful of cards. Then—"

She had lost her audience. The larger medic made himself absent, pushing through the crowd into the medicmat. The smaller one planted himself even more firmly before the body. The set of his jaw rejected further discussion.

The harpy fed the thread of her narrative to a neighbor.

The slight medic peered past the muttering knot into the medicmat. Stiffly, he fingered Borrel. "You. Fredericks wants you. Inside."

Nervously, Borrel pushed through.

Fredericks motioned to the rear of the deserted medicmat. "Show me where you were."

Reluctantly Borrel acceded. "I was in the second booth from the skin."

"Seven?" The medic activated a pocket recorder.

"Seven," Borrel agreed. "He—that man—was in, um, eleven. There was a—" Could the simple word 'cry' describe it? "a— he was having a seizure. He was sprung back, his spine. He made it as far as the lounge, and he fell. He dropped six or seven medicards, and—" Borrel frowned, finally apprehending the significance of the cards. "He was drugging!" he said in astonishment. "He stole those cards, and he was using them to get unauthorized units. He—"

"He dropped the cards on the floor?"

"Why—yes. He went limp and the cards fell." Urgently, Borrel penetrated the lounge, searched the carpeted floor. Unauthorized spray units. But why steal medicards in order to obtain units prescribed for someone else's condition?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The floor of the lounge was bare. The cards were gone.

"You're sure it was a pack of cards? Not just a single?"

Borrel stared up at him, troubled. "There were at least five, I'm sure." His eyes roved back across the carpet, indisputably bare. "Maybe the cards were kicked under a shelf."

The medic shook his head. He turned, fastened a hard gaze upon the single patron left in the lounge, an elderly man sparsely fleshed, barely thatched. "Who picked up those hot cards? You?"

The old man met the accusation with watering eyes. "I never took any cards. I'm no drugger."

The medic was not appeased. "Who got them then?"

The elder clamped his gums. "Didn't see. Wasn't looking."

"Male or female?"

The old man wagged his head.

The medic swung back to Borrel. "You, then, What are you on?"

"On?"

"What goes into you? What kind of units are you getting?"

"Why—I don't know." Borrel was baffled.

The medic glowered. "What are the symptoms?"

"I don't know that either," Borrel admitted, at a loss. "I had an autodiagnosis notice a couple of years ago, after I went in for my bi-annual. So of course I began coming in for units. And I go back for a recheck every few weeks. I—sometimes I feel a little dizzy. If I don't have my units on time."

Coldly, the medic catalogued Borrel, catalogued the elder. Then he was gone, passed back through the sliding door.

Looking after him, Borrel spotted the hovercraft, spartan gray, that had materialized above the scene. A plastic body capsule, supported on silk lines, was reeling down from the belly port.

"Can't blame the poor gal." The elder eyed Borrel defiantly. "A person has to get relief whatever way he can these days."

II

BORREL glanced at him in brief distraction. Then his gaze was drawn out again. Deftly, the small medic opened the swinging gray capsule. Smoothly, the large medic lifted the dead drugger and folded him into the thin-walled container, tucking his hands after him.

"All these fancy little medicine houses. All those fancy consoles

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and sprays and vapors," the old man muttered rebelliously. "You wouldn't think the suffering would go right on, would you? You wouldn't think kids in their thirties and forties would be stealing cards off the floor just for relief."

Borrel turned, stared at him.

"That's right. Stealing off the floor. I remember my granddad, when he was an old man. He used to spend his days in the park. He'd walk around, gossip with the other old boys, feed a few birds. Sit in the sunshine. Well now, how do you think I'm spending my old age?" The watery eyes were indignant. "I strip around the city to the autodiag stations. I cruise up and down in front of the sensors. Then I hit the screens. I make sure I register on every damn one. Just hoping Service will prescribe something new to ease me. With my aches and pains and my weak kidneys, you'd think there'd be something out to help, wouldn't you?"

Borrel managed a noncommittal answer, moved uneasily toward the door.

"Well, who pays for it all?" the old man insisted. "*I* pay. I paid it out of my taxes when I was an earner. All that money for relief in my old age. Who do you know who receives it?"

The door slid. Quickly, Borrel moved to pass through.

Unexpectedly, the elder retained him. Bony fingers dug Borrel's forearm. "Well, who *do* you know who has relief? Who?"

Caught between constraint and growing irritation, Borrel tried again to withdraw.

"You? Do you get relief?" The old eyes fired maliciously.

Irritation won. "Of course I do." Borrel freed his arm with a jerk. "Why else would I come here four times a day?"

For a moment, the old man was almost fierce, toothless, damp-eyed, bristling. "You don't fool me," he crackled. Then he deflated, bitterly. "Well, go on then. I'm nobody to you. Go take your relief. It's coming out of your own pocket." With a knotty hand, he indicated the course back to the medicbooths.

Borrel stared across the booth-set crescent with deepening eyes. A glint of light reflected from a hanging mirror and, glancing, became the echo of a shattering scream.

Shuddering, Borrel backed away.

And found himself outside, up the ramp. The hovercraft had swallowed the body capsule and vacated the sky. All strips slid again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Half-running, Borrel broke for the strip that moved away from both medicmat and rumbling avenue. He caught the walk under his feet, balanced himself, rode back the way he had come. His heart tripped and hammered in his chest. Disturbing questions murmured in his ears.

What *were* his symptoms?

He frowned. He had never really suffered symptoms until recently. One day two years before he had stopped by an autodiagnostic station for his biannual check-up. The next day the autodiag slip, his summons to the medicmat, had come. Something, evidently, some imbalance, some disorder, some malfunction had registered on the sensors, had graphed warning to the interpreting instruments. Evaluation had been made and medication had been prescribed. And thereafter he had reported to the medicmat as directed: four times daily, punctually (usually), without fail.

In addition, he had returned to the autodiag at monthly intervals. And one day another slip had come. His original prescription had been rescinded, a new one entered. For a few weeks, then, he had reported to the medicmat six times daily. Punctually (almost always), without fail.

Then still another slip had come. His second prescription had been canceled and a third entered. He was to revert to reporting to the medicmat four times daily.

Punctually, without fail.

And he did, most days.

Symptoms? He rode the speeding strip. Passengers bound past registered as flickering shadows. Symptoms?

Well, gradually he had become aware—a year ago?— that agorophobia, childhood demon, was asserting itself again. But infrequently, only at certain times. Only, in fact, when he was less punctual than usual in meeting his appointment at the medicmat did open, empty space deepen around him, drawing him, sucking apart the molecules of his being. And until he reached a medicbooth and bared his arm to the cool spray, his very existence was menaced by forces he could not comprehend.

But was that a symptom? If so, of what? He mulled, fruitlessly.

Consider relief, then.

Certainly, he did find relief from the headache, from the cramping tightness of shoulders and neck, from the malignant tension that more and more often possessed him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But he had never needed relief before. He had never suffered tightness, pain. He had never suffered anything, paradoxically, until he had become a patron of the medicmat.

HIS thoughts had led him full circle to nowhere. And now the intensified ache at the base of his skull threatened madness. Now the tautness of neck and shoulders crucified him. Now—he raised his head—now the world was a wide bleak plain swept with whirlwind.

He swayed, reached out his hand. Found nothing to steady himself upon.

But he had to steady himself somehow, somewhere.

The answer suggested itself, urgently. Jump walks. Ride back, back to the medicmat. Dodge through the doors, race through the lounge. Spill into a booth. Bare his arm. Thrust it down. Feel the cool spray of relief.

And hear the terrible cry that echoed there still?

He quivered. He hunched miserably.

Then he straightened, realizing with elation where he could obtain safe enclosure, shelter from the vacuums of the plain. Without second thought, he directed his feet to the shunt. He traversed it and zipped purposefully back toward Wall Fourteen, Traffic Control Central.

And within Control Cube 17A, the shifting glitter of the Wall was hypnotic balm. The noon rush had passed. Early afternoon traffic crawled lazily across Borrel's retinas, soothing him, dissolving tension and pain. His shoulders eased. His neck relaxed.

The console speaker barked. "Operator Behric."

Borrel shuddered alert, hit the talk button. "Here."

"Sorry, Behric, but you've exhausted your work quota for the week. You'll have to yield your cubicle."

Borrel ogled the speaker. Tension gripped him, deformed him. "But— the waiting room?" he croaked.

"Three fresh operators checked in two minutes ago. Not one of them near his quota. You'll have to clear immediately, Behric."

Well, they couldn't make him go. They couldn't send him out. Quivering, Borrel huddled in the shelter of the looming Wall. They couldn't—

"Cheer up," the speaker crackled. "It's only four days to a new week and a new quota. Shaft up to the observation deck if you absolutely can't bear to part."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Borrel's legs, at least, remained rational. A minute later he stood in the corridor watching his replacement check into 17A. Then he was in the shaft, lifting up to the observation balcony.

Which he found jammed to capacity by a school of student traffic controlmen. There was not even standing room for an exiled operator.

Backed out into the upper corridor, Borrel hunched brooding. The world was a cruel place, an open and empty place. Outside he would teeter on the very edge of it, perishing with cold.

He had to find shelter.

Then fine shelter suggested itself: the Botanical Gardens. There in the deep green shadow, in the rising steam of the Jungle Dome—there was no drawing vacuum. There was no bleak, whipping cold. There were containment, protection, security.

There, also, half an hour later, was Borrel Behric, shivering from the ordeal of the streets, his shoulders hunched around the pain of his lower skull. He drew in the steamy air cautiously, winding the circuitous bark path to the murky depths of the glassed jungle.

Security closed balmy arms around him. At the heart of the jungle dome he found the mellow ambience of green shadow, the rich fragrance of damp black soil. At the heart of the dome—

—he found the medicmat.

He halted, his jaw sagging.

It was there. It was a compact 'mat, a narrow single-shelf lounge fronting two medicbooths. Tucked snugly beneath foliage and fronds, it lit the heart of the jungle with lonely blue light.

Unbelieving, he crept near, peered into the incongruent bubblic transparency. He circled, and his heart began to surge. His ears registered the swift rush of blood. The flesh of his forearm warmed to welcome the cool dash of medispray.

His eyes fixed on the open door of the nearer booth, dilated with conditioned anticipation. There, the eager coursing of his blood told him, there was relief, release from tension, anxiety, care. There, within those thin partitions, was containment, security. There—

There, reflected upon the mirror that sided the booth, was a gaunt image, hollow-eyed. There, within the burning eyes, two men merged, one anxious and tense, seeking relief, the other mindless, blind, cavorting his way to grim death.

Borrel jerked his head aside. Floundering, he regained the path, sagged to a mossed log. His muscles rippled in painful spasm. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

twitching of his eyelids made the jungle around him a snarl of spastic greenery and epileptic vines.

Gulping, he put his feet under him, launched himself up the path.

A hand stayed him, lightly. "Please. I can see you need help."

Borrel jumped, spun, crouched facing her.

"You really do need help." Her face was a pale moonlet drifting between twin sheets of yellow hair. "Your entire musculature is taut. I can see the muscles stretched under your coverall. And your face is twitching, and your respiration is very shallow." She cocked her head, leaned nearer. Then she straightened, almost primly. "My name is Merila," she offered.

Borrel relaxed, barely.

"Merila Fox," she amplified. "But I don't know your name."

He wet his lips. "Borrel," he muttered, cornered. "Behric."

She nodded. "Why don't you go inside the medicmat? Have you lost your medicard?"

He shook his head.

"Then why don't you go in? You really appear to be very ill."

SLOWLY, hunched, twitching, he backed from her scrutiny.

"I really only want to help. *Are* you very ill? There are beads of perspiration on your forehead. Your face is pasty. When you looked inside the medicmat a few minutes ago, I thought you were going to have some kind of—of—"

—seizure! His body shuddered violently. The muscles of his legs cramped. He choked on a tongue that suddenly swelled down his throat, obstructing it.

Salt tears clouded his vision. The medicmat glimmered, a beacon of promise in a crawling sea of green. Necessity swept the girl from his path, flung his tormented body back down the path, through the door, across the lounge, into the medicbooth.

His card was in his fingers, flapping wildly.

Silent. The scream was silent. And all the more piercing for being entirely within him, it curdled the soft tissues of his brain, rupturing the barrier between reality and nightmare.

Borrel was outside the booth. The creature who danced past him was no more than apparition. But Borrel shrank from its ghostly agonies, pressed himself hard against the solid reality of the medicbooth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then the spectral drugger lay twitching on the path. And Borrel was in the lounge, flung like a rag across the padded wallshelf, panting harshly. Merila Fox's fingers danced over his hypersensitive flesh like a phalanx of spur-shod moths. She bent, mouthed anxieties, worried him with questions. But the words were lost between them.

Slowly a single concept formed at the center of his weakness. "Time," he managed to groan. "Time."

Merila Fox leaned near. Her mouth moved. " . . . till three."

Three. Something till three. Borrel blinked stupidly into her eyes. "Nine—hours." The words were laborious.

"Nine hours?" She understood quickly. "Nine hours since you had your last dose?"

"Nine," he repeated, heaving himself up. "Hours."

"No. No, stay down," she insisted, pushing his chest. "I'm going to call Health."

A callset was framed into a nearby partition. She punched, and the screen lit with the blue and gold insignia of Health. Then an office-cured slice of gray replaced the insignia. "Health. Station identification, please."

"My name doesn't matter. I'm not calling for myself. I'm calling for—"

"Station identification, please," the face reiterated, dryly.

"Oh! I'm sorry! I'm calling from the one in the Jungle Dome at the Botanical Gardens. I'm—"

"The correct number is plated on the punch panel. I cannot service your call until you have given me your correct station number, please."

Quickly the girl consulted the punch panel. "Seven-nine-three-two-four-Z."

The screen went blank. Then a second face, unpleasingly plump, appeared. "Health. Patient Identification, please."

"I—I'm calling for Mr. Borrel Behric. He's—"

The face quivered unpleasantly. "I can't service your call until you have presented the patient's identification."

Flustered, the girl snatched the medicard from Borrel's grasp, shoved it into the identifcation slot. "It's not my card. It's Mr. Borrel Behric's. He's—"

The screen was blank again.

The third face was a wedge of stone crudely chipped. "Servicing Mr. Borrel Behric's call from Station seven-nine-three-two-four-Z.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes! Mr. Behric is—he's just had some kind of attack. I think. He's very weak, and he's—you see, it's nine hours since he had his medication. He's—"

"Is there some reason he can't reach a medicbooth?"

"Oh, no. I don't think so. But—"

"Are all the booths at that station filled to capacity?"

"Oh, no, they're empty, both of them."

"Are the booths inoperative?"

"No! No. At least, I don't think so. But Mr. Behric is—is—please! There's something *wrong!*"

The face showed faint signs of humanity. "There usually is, dear. Now, why don't you just have Mr. Bheric stagger or crawl to the nearest booth? Carry him if necessary. And instruct him not to delay his medication for nine hours next time." The image rippled and was gone.

The girl stared, her eyes narrowing. With a small sound of exasperation, she punched again.

The screen lit with insignia, then with narrow gray face. "Health. Station identification, please."

"We just spoke a moment ago. I—"

"Your station identifcation, please."

"You already have it! I called you just—"

"The correct number is plated on the punch panel. I cannot service your call—"

The girl's eyes grew. Fiercely, the chopped the circuit. "Borrel, you just have to try again," she cried, wheeling. "You have to go into the booth and take your units."

Borrel sat, tottered to his feet. His body felt weak, alien. Befuddled, he brushed past the girl, stared down the narrow path.

Empty. They had taken him away, the ghost-drugger. His ephemeral body was encased in obscurity somewhere, vapor-bound.

"No, no, you're going the wrong way." The girl tried to steer him back to the lounge.

He pulled away, oriented himself. Then he paced unsteadily away beneath the sheltering greenery, sucking at the moist air. His head wobbled giddily.

"Borrel, please! You have to try!"

"Home," he groaned, casting free of her grasping fingers. No druggers in the two small rooms of his private domain. No druggers at his house.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Borrel, I only want to help!"

They reached the exit, and cold slapped their faces. Borrel gasped. Then he was off down the narrow walk, his head clearing and settling.

"Borrel, wait! I left my coat. Borrel, please don't!"

Please don't fly up the ramp? Don't thump aboard the walkstrip with a single, graceless bound? He did it anyway.

"Borrel!"

Home.

No druggers there. No threatening emptiness. No girl, either, flittering hysterically behind, babbling words that kept being lost between them.

Home.

Funny. A mile or two later a strange thing became of his arm, his right arm. It ceased to be a mere flapping appendage. Became instead almost an entity in itself, warm, tingly, the focus of a delicious, an exquisite anticipation.

But anticipation of what? Borrel glanced around feverishly, dizzy with the sudden rush of blood through his head, hot with the surge and flow of it.

He peered, and the report came back. Medicmat dead ahead.

III

HIS pupils dilated eagerly to receive the welcome image. His body expanded with joy. His legs moved, and he was galloping down the sliding strip. Late afternoon sunlight glanced from the transparent dome of the 'mat, flashed in bright sheets across his face. Glad tears splashed down his cheeks. His arm throbbed.

The doors slid. He flashed through the lounge, dashed across the floorspace, flung into an empty booth, fell across the bench. His right arm, bared, was down the well. The fingers of his left hand were fumbling with his medicard.

Then, with a spiny crackling, his body stiffened. He rocked back against the partition of the booth, threw himself violently away, writhing desperately to dislodge the scream that stuck in his throat, choking him.

Helplessly, he felt his body bow back, felt his feet arch, felt himself fling from the booth and dance stiffly across the floorspace, at the focus of a dozen quick-frozen eyes. He heard, over the thin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

banner of ghost-agony that streamed down his throat, the growling mutter around him.

"Drugger!"

"Drugger in here!"

"Drugger loose!"

No! No! *Not!*

His feet carried him in the rembered pattern. He reached the lounge, spinning helplessly. The red emergency button leapt to his eyes, vibrated hotly.

With ferocious effort, he gained momentary control of his feet. Caroming from one squealing matron, plowing against another, he managed to reach the button, to fall against it. And from there to the floor, the breath slammed from his body.

He was ringed with glittery-bright eyes, avid faces. A wiry hand grasped his wrist, wrenched at his medicard.

"You leave him alone!" Merila Fox, suddenly, was at the center of the ring of wolves, her face flushed with indignation. "Mr. Behric is extremely ill. He needs care immediately." Her fingers extracted the card from his grasp, inserted it into his holder.

HE CLOSED his eyes, shivered, hugging himself. When he opened his gaze again, the circlet of eyes had shifted inward.

The girl glared up. "Listen, you'd better leave us alone! He's already having trouble breathing."

Two minutes later the doors slid. Boots thumped across the floor, dispersing the wolf-ring of eyes. Two medics, one dark, one fair, crouched.

"Oh, thank goodness!" the girl breathed. "It's been nine, almost ten hours since Mr. Behric had medication, and he's just had some kind of attack. He's—"

The dark medic's voice sliced across her babble. "Pull back, kid." He loomed over Borrel, peered at him from violet eyes cast in deep triangular sockets. "I'm going to meter you. Keep still."

Borrel's chest was bared. Icy sensors searched his ribcage, traced his sternum, spiraled across his abdomen, withdrew.

The dark medic coiled tubes back into the meter box, spoke tersely to the fair medic. "Routine. You post the door while I pick up details."

Borrel managed to sit. Weakly he stared at the morning's scene palely superimposed over the afternoon's. On the walk outside, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ghost-drugger had expired. Dimly, the gray hovercraft was lowering near.

Gradually Borrel became aware of questions hanging in the air. Turning, he met the barely-patient eyes of the dark medic.

"Are you with me yet? Ready to answer questions?"

Borrel labored to frame an answer. But it was difficult to concentrate with the body capsule reeling down, with the two ghostly medics, one husky, one slight, wrestling the limp body into it.

The girl crept near. "You really must take him to a hospital. He's had two attacks in an hour. His entire musculature—"

The medic pinned her darkly. "You're a relative? A wife maybe?"

The girl flushed. "I'm a concerned citizen! That's all. But—"

"Well, listen, Concerned: withdrawal reactions aren't eligible for hospitalization today. Too low on the priority list. If your friend had gone off his spray Tuesday, when accidents were down, maybe I could have admitted him. But today casualties from the outage on Seven get first crack."

Merila Fox flared. "I'm not concerned with a power failure on the other side of the city. I'm concerned—"

"With poking your nose in. But take my word. The best I can do for this guy is the second semi-emergency list. He might get in in five days or three weeks. A month at the outside."

"But he needs care now!" she insisted. "It's been almost ten hours since he had medication. He's—"

The medic shrugged. "Then let's you and me stagger him over and spill him into a booth. Get him sprayed. That's more than they'd give if I wangled him into a hospital today."

The girl stiffened, glared. "It wouldn't work. That's what I'm trying to tell you. When he goes into a booth, his entire musculature becomes rigid. His eyes bulge. He's—"

The medic snorted.

"Well, it's true! I think it's a traumatic reaction. He shakes and sweats. And then after he's in the booth, he has an attack of some kind." She rattled off her description of events.

The medic lifted his shoulders and dropped them. "Okay. A panic attack. But what do you want me to do?"

Her eyes flashed. "If you can't put him into a hospital, then administer his medication yourself. Right here."

Outside, the capsule was loaded. The shadowy hovercraft was moving away down the skylane. With a sigh, Borrel re-unified the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fragments of his personality, shifted his attention back to the interior of the medicmat.

The medic said wryly, "Sure, if I had control of some units, it would be easy enough to do a spray. But I don't control units. I don't carry them around with me, and I don't have any way to lay hands on them. I have absolutely no access whatsoever.

"And this guy doesn't have medical indications anyway. He has standard manifestations of early withdrawal. He has—"

"He has seizures! He—"

"Kid, that's not what we're discussing. That's something else. Call it trauma. What I'm talking about is his physiological readings, what shows on my gauges when I tap him. I've stripped the beat for seventeen years, and I can read withdrawal when I see it." The meter box was open again.

So was Borrel's shirt. He flinched from the cold caress of sensors. "Withdrawal," he echoed dully. He'd heard of withdrawal. Drugger trouble.

He'd heard of druggers too.

"See," the medic insisted. "The series of peaks here. The ragged oscillation on the lower dials, with both left indicators swinging down. Withdrawal." He glanced up, caught Borrel's still-dull gaze. "How much medication have you been getting?"

With effort, Borrel found an answer. "Four."

"Four applications? How many times a day?"

"He means he comes in four times a day," Merila Fox said.

"Is that right? You come in four times a day?"

Borrel assented.

"And how many applications four times a day?"

Borrel's head was clearing. "Applications?" he said, puzzled.

"The blue light. How many times does the blue light flash when you have your arm down the well? Twice? Three times?"

Frowning, Borrel visualized a spray console, activated it. He located the blue light, monitored it. "Four. Four applications. Sometimes five." His head was cleared now. The ghost-world had vanished, and the gears of his mind ground forward upon the implications of the medic's words. "But withdrawal is drugger stuff. Connected with the drugger phenomenon."

The medic raised one eyebrow. "It sure is, friend."

"Well, I'm no drugger. I'm a patient. A client."

The eyebrow peaked. "You've been 'matting four times a day, get-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ting four, sometimes five applications each time. Which means six, seven, even eight different drugs spread over your day. And you're no drugger?"

Borrel flushed. "I know about druggers," he said tightly. "They steal cards and then they abuse their bodies by absorbing anything they can. They don't care what it is. They don't even know what they're getting. Druggers—"

"You know what you're getting?"

Borrel's jaw closed with an angry snap. "Perhaps I don't know the correct pharmaceutical names of the drugs that are administered to me," he clipped off indignantly. "But at least they were prescribed specifically for me."

"By whom?"

Borrel tried to spot the trap behind the question. "By the autodiagnostic department, of course."

THE medic rocked back on his heels, nodding. "And that's how just about everyone starts. The autodiag." His eyes flickered to his teammate beyond the door. They returned to Borrel. "You look bright. Try this. Go out there some time and open your eyes all the way and look around. Really look for a change. You'll see a street full of druggers. The quiet kind who don't have to grab someone else's card and steal someone else's units to cope with their problems. Because they're already so pepped up and tranqued out and boosted and stabilized and maintained they wouldn't know a problem if they collided with one.

"And if some small worry does bob to the top, they can damp it down legally enough. Try it—if you haven't already. Some day when you're feeling low, cruise an autodiag and project. Put as much force as you can behind your feelings when you hit the sensors and do the anatom screens. Next day there will be a new entry on your card. And you could be absorbing mood elevators for a year.

"Or maybe you catch cold. You get a comfort prescription, but a cog slips and there's no automatic seven-day stop on the prescription. You could be dosing that cold forever.

"And you don't even have to know you're getting more drugs today than you were yesterday. Because if Central can work the new drug into your present 'mat schedule, you won't even have a summons. All you'll notice—if you notice that much—is that the blue light flashes more some days than others."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Borrel stared at him, a cold chill inching down his spine. "That's—no, that's wrong," he said hollowly. "That's all wrong. That's—" AutoHealth had been designed to protect his health, to preserve it. Not to turn him into something craven, something ghastly and shrunken. AutoHealth had been instituted—

"But there's supposed to be a regular review of each file," Merila Fox protested. "I studied AutoHealth in secondary school. Our instructor told us that at least once each ninety days, a panel of physicians studies each file and eliminates any superfluous medication. Then—"

"That's how it's supposed to work," the medic interrupted. "But when there aren't enough doctors to meet genuine emergencies, guess how many there are for file review."

The girl frowned. "But then the entire system should be adjusted. To prevent it from prescribing drugs for people who are already overdosed."

"Define overdosed."

"You just did," she protested. "You said some people are getting so many units they wouldn't recognize a valid problem if—if it slapped them in the face."

The medic nodded. "And that's how they like it. People don't want worry any more than they want pain. They'll become dependent on whatever mode of relief they find. Right now, one person out of two—my own conservative estimate—thinks the bottom will drop out of he isn't 'on' something. If the 'mats quit dispensing to the soft-core druggers, there would be a howl from coast to coast. And the clients are paying the bills, one way or another."

"That's all a matter of your opinion." Borrel hauled himself upright, frowning. "You can't expect me to terminate my prescribed medication because of your interpretation of what you see on the meter face."

The medic shrugged. "You could do yourself some good." He was on his feet too.

"I could do myself a great deal of harm."

"He could," Merila Fox worried. "Because isn't it possible there might be something that doesn't show on your meter? Something that is still masked by the units he had this morning?"

The medic sighed in exasperation. "Possible? Barely." He swung his attention back to Borrel. "But I can suggest one way to find out:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

try breaking. Stay away from the medicmat for a few weeks. Give your physiology time to adjust back to its own level, and see how you feel—better or worse.

"If Health sends reminders, ignore them. No one has to absorb his units. It's not law."

Borrel met the suggestion with skepticism.

Disgust crossed the medic's face. He drew a memo pad, scrawled. "All right, don't trust my meter. Or me." He whipped off the slip, thrust it at Borrel. "Go see this man. He's a physician in private practice, a good one. Ask him to do a complete physical. Then ask him if you have some exotic condition, or if you're just a drugger like the rest."

Borrel accepted the slip, examined it briefly. He was to seek out a physician who had no connection with the established health services? And ask the man to perform the function of an autodiag? "That would be extremely irregular."

"It sure would," the medic agreed. "But you're in an irregular fix. Aren't you?" His eyes searched Borrel's. Then he was responding to his teammate's summons, moving to the door, out. He raised his right forearm, clasped it in an odd salute. In a moment he disappeared down the walkway, his teammate sliding behind.

Patrons flowed back into the medicmat.

"That must be their pass sign," Merila Fox mused.

Borrel turned unreceptive eyes to her suggestion.

"Didn't you notice how he clasped his arm? It must have been a salute. I think he belongs to one of those anti-drug groups. He might even be a reformed drugger himself. I expect the doctor belongs to the group, too, and he'll be able to help you break your dependency." Her eyes were bright with the prospect.

Borrel bristled. "I'm not a drugger. I've never been a drugger. I don't take anyone's medicine but my own, and I can do without my own any time I want to. I can—"

"See? You just admitted it."

His eyes flared. "Admitted what?"

"You admitted you can do without your units. That means you don't really believe there's a physical condition. That means you're taking units because you're psychologically dependent. That means—"

"*No!*" His temples bulged. He balled the memo slip, hurled it.

Alarmed, the girl scrambled after it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And while she scrambled, he made himself gone. Gone out the sliding door, up the boarding ramp, down the fast-sliding strip, bound into the sun.

He heard her voice, raised. He didn't look back. Instead he ran, hurled himself headlong down the moving strip, pushed past stationary peds, flung himself away frim girl and medicmat. His thoughts blew out behind him like banners in a gale, flapping noisily. The city was a blur.

Then his breath was spent. His pounding legs were numb. He stumbled, caught his balance, sagged, panted.

A shining arch filled the corner of his eye. He turned, stared at the autodiagnostic station that flanked the eastbound lanes. Within the vault of the arch, sensors dangled from silken threads. Chest screens, belly screens, skull screens were recessed into the broad flanks of the arch.

IV

HIS heart pattered with exhilaration. It would take only a moment. Jump walks. Slide back. Dismount. Register first, automatically, on the delicately swaying sensors. Then pace quickly around the flanks of the arch, pausing briefly at each anatom screen. The autodiag would read his identity from the card at his belt. It would read his physiological status from the static of his brain, from the electrolytic concentration of his body fluids, from the chemical composition of his breath, from a hundred other small clues.

And then tomorrow, next day at the latest, there would be a new prescription entered on his card. Something to help. Something to relieve.

He did it. Jumped, slid, dismounted. Registered. Paced. He exhaled into the mask, spread his saliva on the sensitive plate, entered the small door to leave a scant sample of urine.

The south leg of the arch was a duplicate diagnostic set-up. Again, quickly, he exhaled, salivated, urinated.

Then he paced back and peered up at the shining arch, a hard frown of concentration corrugating his brow. If that didn't set the electrosynapses closing, if that didn't get the impulses flowing, if *that* didn't start a fresh prescription moving—

A pale shadow slid past him. Borrel froze.

She was shriveled, shrunken. Her eyes burned from a mask of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yellowed skin, and she clutched her medicard anxiously. In turn, she pressed her wasted bosom against the chest plate, edged her sunken abdomen against the belly plate, dropped her head heavily against the skull screen. A soft moan wormed blindly from her throat. Her eyes sought up, back, around, burning to locate the receptivity of the towering diagnostic entity, to plead her case.

Borrel stood, unwilling monument, while she made her slow passage, while she lingered and shivered. Finally, head bowed, she shuffled aboard the sliding walk, was borne away.

Borrel shuddered. He slid homeward, suddenly sodden with weariness and damp chill. The sun was setting. Exhaustion dulled the lights that brightened the face of the city. He reached his own building, shafted high, keyed the lock.

Knew nothing more till he woke in the morning, huddled in a corner behind a chair, his arms wrapped tight around his chest.

On his knees, he peered warily from his upholstered fort.

His room was different. The sunlight that fell through the high window was colder, harsher. The room itself was deeper, barer. The stretching floor was tracked with half a dozen lost years, the wall soiled with the luminous print of ghost-hands. His own.

Borrel towered unsteadily above the gray carpet. He swayed in the direction of the small serving counter. When he had stared at the row of buttons for half a dozen vacant minutes, he ventured a finger, punched.

Breakfast appeared, far too much breakfast, mounds and heaps of it, cold, congealed on the platter. But when he had taken a few mouths of the stuff, he had an empty plate. And a burned tongue.

Nothing, then, was as it seemed. He frowned. The carpet was worn with thoughts he had never paced. The chair sagged with worries he had never considered. The bed was rumpled with the tossings and churnings of a hundred nights he had passed inert, dreamless.

Drugger.

His hands shook. His eyes, he knew, stared. His forearm itched, tormenting him. He hunched on his stool, and the entire of yesterday, of two years of yesterdays, was spread around for his inspection. It draped over the chair, dragged across the carpet, blanketed the serving counter.

Drugger.

Shrinking, he huddled in the midst of it. He had read about druggers. Weaklings who lived for the few minutes a day they spent arms-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

down-well. Overcivilized jellyfish who couldn't face a crisis without units. Couldn't, in fact, face even a non-crisis.

But that had nothing to do with him. He had valid prescriptions. He was on schedule. He received units for some measurable condition that had registered on an autodiag one afternoon two years ago, some condition that had not cleared in the usual week or two. He received units so that the reality of physical deterioration would neither detract from his efficiency nor disrupt his pleasure. He received units because—

Drugger, then?

No! He was no drugger. He had registered on the screens routinely. He had not asked for anything. He had not cruised the sensors. He had not begged.

But something had appeared on the read-out, some early warning sign, some incipient shadow. AutoHealth Central had processed his readings, and a summons had been coded for his inbin. And there had never been any question of doubting the diagnosis, ignoring the summons.

But there was question now. He had to admit that. And until it was dismissed, he could not return easily to his routine, his schedule, his units. He could not return easily to anything.

He stared thoughtfully across his room at the callscreen. He had never requested a definition of the shadow, never demanded an explanation of the early warning sign.

But it was his shadow, his degeneration. He had a right to know what afflicted him. He had a right, a duty even, to act and plan in the light of reason.

Deciding, he towered across the room, loomed unsteadily before the callscreen, punched.

The screen filled with blue and gold. Then the insignia was replaced by a brisk face. "Identification, please?"

Borrel fumbled his card from his belt, exhibited it.

"I'll service your call myself, Mr. Behric." After a moment, she prompted him. "What was your question, please?"

Borrel gathered courage. "I have to know what's wrong with me," he blurted, raw.

Her face registered nothing. "Yes sir. Your nearest autodiagnostic station is located adjacent to the southbound lanes of Aldenaire Avenue." Her features flickered, dimmed.

"No, wait!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her image steadied back. "Sir!"

"I don't want an autodiagnosis. I had one last night. I want to know what's wrong with me. *I* want to know."

Her mouth contracted slightly. "Mr. Behric, I cannot reveal that information. Patient files are completely confidential. However, if you would like, I can arrange a group consultation with an appropriate specialist."

"And he'll tell me what's wrong?"

Annoyance marked her features. "Of course not. Confidential information cannot be discussed in the group setting. However, I am sure the specialist will tender many valuable suggestions for preserving and maintaining optimum health." She bent over her electronic desktop, electromagnetic stylus in hand.

"You can't give me a private consultation?"

Her head snapped up. "That is entirely impossible. Our physicians are much too busy to grant private interviews. To anyone." She wrote quickly, with a flourish. "You will be notified of the date of your appointment within ten days." Her image flickered again.

He called her back, desperately. "Please! Can't you at least tell me what kind of specialist I'll see?"

Her eyes flared. "Mr. Behric, the type of specialist is relevant to diagnosis, and that *remains* confidential material! If you don't release this channel immediately, I'm going to lodge complaint with the corruptions committee."

STARTLED, he released.

Discomposed, he backed into the chair. His hands shook violently. Shook today, now. Not ten days from now. Not two weeks from now. His lower lip quivered.

Well, he still had one resource. He had wadded the memo and tossed it. But he had retained the name, the address.

He sank deeper into the chair, shivering. He had the name, true. But what assurance did he have that the man was competent? Why, if he *were* capable, was he not affiliated with Health Service? Why was his name passed secretly, on furtively scribbled slips?

And was it even legal for an AutoHealth client to approach a private physician? Was it ethical for the physician to honor his approach?

Borrel huddled, muddled, in a dark cloud of consideration.

Then, brightening, he remembered Vennl.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vennl, who nearly a dozen years before had zipped through a regular, old-fashioned marriage-divorce with Borrel's Aunt Tanni. It had registered upon Borrel's young mind at the time that Uncle Vennl was connected with one of the medical industries, although it had never been clear exactly which, or what the connection might be.

Uncle Vennl, of course. Borrel remembered the round, merry face, the wreathing smiles. Remembered, too, uneasily, the sharp little teeth.

QUICKENING nevertheless, Borrel punched Information, obtained Vennl's day number.

Uncle Vennl appeared immediately, against a backdrop of electronic opulence. His Santa visage dimpled and his eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Well, Borrel. My boy. How did you get hold of your old Uncle Vennl?"

Borrel drew his gaze from the gleaming incisors, pulled himself together. Almost. "I—punched Information."

"Ah! Clever." Vennl beamed. "But you don't look well, Borrel. Not at all well, young man."

Borrel shriveled. "I'm—not, Uncle Vennl."

"Ah! But I'm sure Service will have you stabilized in short order, Borrel. In fact, if you'd like, I can arrange an instant prescription. It's within my power, you know."

"I—no, I didn't. I really didn't. But I don't know what's in my file. I don't even know the diagnosis."

Vennl's teeth glittered. "And neither do I, my boy. I'm concerned with drug manufacture, not with diagnostics or dispensing. But if you'll bring yourself down to the nearest autodiag, I'll have your read-out pushed through instanter, and the prescription will be on your card by noon. Sooner, if you'll hurry."

Borrel's heart leapt, a fish flying for bait. But he swallowed it down again. "No. No. For my own peace of mind, I have to know the diagnosis. I have to know what's wrong." He frowned, trying to fit his doubts into a proper verbal framework. "Uncle Vennl, would it be illegal or unethical, if I just happened to have the name of a private physician—"

The wreath of smiles wilted. "And exactly where are you planning to obtain the name of this private, Borrel?" Vennl commanded.

"I have resources," Borrel responded defensively. "I—you see—" He chewed his lip, found it unpalatable. "Uncle Borrel, I've just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been told that I've been turned into a drugger. And I have to *know*. I—"

The Santa mask dissolved. Vennl's face darkened ominously across the viewer and his voice took a jagged edge. "My dear boy, I would appreciate it enormously if you would tell me why the drug industry should be at all interested in turning *you* into a drugger."

Borrel recoiled. "I—I don't know," he admitted limply.

"You don't know." Vennl's eyes became dense, hot. "Then tell me this, Borrel. Why did my generation bring AutoHealth into being in the first place? For the sole purpose of corrupting our young?"

"No. Of course not." Borrel plucked nervously at this thoughts. "It was the scarcity of trained personnel. AutoHealth was the only efficient way to service so many clients with so few doctors and technicians."

Vennl was not appeased. "That was a factor, of course. But the primary reason for the establishment of AutoHealth was to halt the abuse of pharmaceuticals by irresponsible individuals young *and* old. I'm not speaking just of the adolescents who dosed themselves for thrills. I'm speaking of all the others, too, who medicated themselves with the wrong pharmaceuticals for the wrong reasons, the people who prescribed any potion they were offered for their own use, eschewing professional guidance.

"And while you're here, Borrel, let me cite you the wholesale costs of just a few of the common medications AutoHealth purchases from my own organization. Medications which are used by hundreds of thousands of patients *several times every day*.

"Norquazil, for instance—one dollar and thirty-two cents. *Per dose, Borrel*. Beneficen—one-sixty-seven. Per dose. Modapressna—eighty-four cents. Hydramalline—ninety-seven cents." He fixed Borrel to the spot, flourished a dozen more names, prices.

"Now, I ask you, Borrel. Why would our Federal Government, in the agency of AutoHealth, dose millions of clients at these prices in such careless fashion as to produce addiction and dependency? Very costly addiction and dependency. Why would the health industries first lobby for the autosystem as a fighting measure against drug abuse, then turn around and foster an even more deleterious order of abuse through that very same system? And at public expense?" Rings flashed on his fist. "Why, Borrel? Can you tell me?"

Borrel's eyes slid evasively around Vennl's setting, hung on the dozen art panels that constituted one wall of his chamber, on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

electro-gadgety convenience system that comprised another, on the deep silky carpet, on the broad electronic desktop. He frowned, trying to draw some coherent conclusion to the top of his mind. "Maybe," he ventured, "because the system isn't working very well right now, Uncle Vennl."

It was not the answer Vennl had been drawing for. Displeasure kindled his plump features. "Young man, let me tell you something about management." He unreeled a heated testimony of degrees, honors, seminars, symposiums. "AutoHealth," he declared, "salaries more Ph.D's at management level than any other agency of the Federal Government. AutoHealth maintains seventeen consultants who work directly with the President himself on critical matters of policy and general management." His voice harked on. "And you, Borrel, suggest that our system 'isn't working very well?' "

The harsh light in Vennl's eye, the flash of jewels upon his clenching fist, did not invite debate. "Well, I—I won't bother you any longer, Vennl," Borrel decided, uneasily. "Maybe you could just tell me, if you can, if it would be unethical for me to consult a private physician?"

Vennl filled the viewer, darkly. "Borrel, I would like you to give me the name of this maverick you propose to consult."

Borrel drew back. "Well, actually, I don't have the name—"

"Then how do you propose to get the name, Borrel?"

"I have resources. But—"

"Ah! And does your resource function within the matrix of AutoHealth? Or within the drug industry itself, perhaps?"

Borrel drew back from the onslaught. "Oh, no, he's not connected with the drug industry. He's—"

"AutoHealth then! Diagnostics or dispensing?" Vennl's eyes were twin weasels, slithering after prey.

Panicked, Borrel retreated.

"What echelon does this person occupy? Is he public contact? Does he function at—"

Instinctively, with a lunge, Borrel broke circuit. Before sharp white teeth could catch the flesh of his arm, shred it. Then he shriveled into the chair, his uncle's after-image glaring impotently, incisors bared.

Ex-uncle, he reminded himself. Ex-uncle in-law.

That decided him. He launched himself. He was in the bathroom, faced with his own unkempt morning image: dark hair standing in spikes, jawline infested with whiskery growth, eyes traumatized,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flesh pasty. Frowning, he ran water, depiled, scrubbed, splashed, combed.

Dressed.

It was time to go. Time to begin to face it, whatever it was. Time to venture to the far exurb where practiced Dr. Niles G. Zandren, private physician.

Spinal column rigid, innards liquid, he set out into the morning sun.

V

THE city was a cubic distortion. Windows were skewed vacancies, doorways sagging maws. The sun burned from a hold in a rippling sky. Twisted shadows flickered across the broad, rumbling avenue.

But nothing, Borrel reminded himself, nothing was as it seemed. Not today.

He zipped past an autodiag arch. Sped near an AutoHealth administrative outpost. Shuddered past one medicmat, a second, a third, arm itching, calves twitching.

Finally he jumped walk at the south perimeter of the city. The river grumbled at his feet, pea-green, restless. He hopped the passenger conveyor and crossed the water.

Soon he was aboard another stripwalk, sliding at leisurely pace through the pastel mazes of exurbia. The perfume of photosynthesis touched his nostrils. His back was warmed with sunlight.

Then tickled with the cold mosquito dance of alarm.

There was someone behind him. Someone following.

Borrel twisted, sought the walkway to his rear.

A dozen people, two dozen, rode behind him. None showed interest. None met his peering eye.

He turned, frowned, slumped. And the eyes were on his back again, magnifying him. He lifted his shoulders restlessly, trying to shrug off scrutiny.

Unsuccessfully.

He glanced back again. Then he began to trot. He moved past a clot of stationary peds, dodged around a woman with bundles, plunged down the sliding strip into the candy heart of exurbia.

He slowed, peered back nervously.

And this time they were all staring at him. So many pairs of eyes touched him that he couldn't pick the one pair that stung.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He shivered, twitched. Someone *was* following him. Someone *was* using him, Borrel Behric, as guide in the choice of routes. And he was behaving like a madman fleeing keepers.

He regained control, stiffened his back, stared straight ahead.

They passed from the commercial district, reached a diverging web of walks that serviced the residential acres of the exurb. Borrel hesitated, consulted a mental Wall, chose the narrow yellow walk that disappeared into a bank of greenery.

When he emerged, dignified homes were arranged each side of the walk. He looked around with interest. Looked behind casually.

And his heart stalled. He *was* followed. She had been there before he changed walks, and she was there now, a young Oriental, her hair pulled back on her neck, her face equal parts reflective sunlenses and purposefully set lips. He stared at her.

His gaze must have penetrated. A bare, unreadable smile touched her lips. The sunlenses glinted.

His heart thumped.

And he sprawled.

The walkstrip had ended abruptly at a low gate. Within the connected cubicle, a guard yawned. Borrel scrambled to his feet, peered beyond the gate at tall homes, tree-lined walks.

Lazily, the guard filled his window. "Who you for?"

Borrel glanced back over his shoulder. "Dr. Zandren, please."

"You're his patient?"

"I—no, not yet."

"You have an appointment then? To start being his patient?"

"No. But I want to make one. That's why I need to go in to see him."

"Let me try his office." The guard leaned across his cubicle, punched the callboard.

Borrel fidgeted, uncomfortably aware of the young woman who neared the end of the walkstrip.

"Can't raise anyone. I'll have to issue a tracer. Hand it in when you leave, okay?"

Hastily, Borrel buckled the narrow bracelet. Then he was through the gate, plunging down the street. A long block later, he glanced back.

She had passed through the gate. She was pacing the street behind him with a measured, purposeful tread.

Desperately, he looked around. Found himself on the edge of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parklet. A small blue pond sparkled, its surface set with ducks. A callbooth nestled behind the broad trunk of an evergreen.

Borrel's feet flashed. He was within the callbooth, cleverly concealed behind hunching shoulders. When he peered out, warily, a few minutes later, the young woman had rounded a shaded curve, passed from sight.

Shaky with relief, he emerged from the booth.

And froze.

A shadow hovered at the edge of the pond, a pale insubstantiality with eyes that burned out hotly, a dim, small person who had been bobbing near since—when?

HALTED, Borrel worked desperately to place the shadow in time, in space. He unreeled the film footage of his day, groped for the frame where the dim, lurking entity had first appeared.

In vain.

The hot eyes flickered away. The shadowy person of Borrel's pursuer lost focus, faded against the exurban background.

Quickly, heart bumping, Borrel slipped out of the small park, pounded up the curving walk, fled.

When he glanced back, he was barely able to perceive his shadowy follower. Chilling, he knew he could well have borne this vague cloud of pursuit since early morning with only the occasional pressure of burning eyes and the brief, intermittent awareness of scrutiny to warn him.

He pattered down the shaded streets, his eyes searching for a number, his mind for an answer. Whoever the person who followed, he must not betray Dr. Zandren to him. When his eyes found the number, he must give no sign. Instead, he must race past the doctor's door, loop the lazy exurban streets, flash out the guarded gate, lead the hot-eyed blur into the busy heart of the exurb. Lose him there.

And then return, circuitously, alone, to—

—Dr. Zandren's!

Yes! Dr. Zandren's! The tall, dark house, there, with the two-story addition appended to its south wing. That was the number. That had to be the place.

His feet accelerated, carried him abreast of the structure. His eyes reconfirmed the number. It was the place.

And never mind his resolution. He couldn't pass by. Couldn't race

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the streets, exit the gate, lead the shadow away into a maze of strip-walks. He was magnetized. He was running, panting, grappling the door knob. Stumbling into the small, cool room, falling back against the closing door.

He caught his breath. There were three stiff chairs, one small table, a glossy spread of magazines. There was a desk, bare. And there were two doors, side by side in a pin-striped wall.

Anxiously, Borrel centered himself in the room. He spun to the first door, rattled it.

Locked.

Spun to the second, rattled.

Locked.

He backed away, jittered out the door he had entered, stared again at the number that marked the place.

This *was* the place. That *was* the number on the memo slip.

His eyes swung, hung on the shadow that blended into the broad base of a tree three lawns away. Hot eyes burned from the shade.

Hastily, Borrel retreated into the office.

He paced the floor, trying to draw clue from the sparse furnishings, from the blank face of the two locked doors. He was here. He had ventured. He had come. But there appeared to be no one to receive him, to ask his business. And there were no instructions posted.

But then one of the locked doors opened quietly. A young woman stepped out, crisp in white, a bare morning smile upon her face.

Her Far Eastern face.

There was utter stillness, except for the trapped gurglings of Borrel's heart.

The sunlenses had been replaced. Thick clear lenses in heavy frames magnified her eyes. She touched the glasses. "Can I help you?"

Petrified, wordless, he weathervaned to chart her progress to the small desk.

"I'm the office nurse," she explained patiently. "May I render assistance?"

The office nurse?

He deflated, slowly assimilating her identity. The office nurse had not followed him here. The office nurse had not stalked his trail. The office nurse had merely been bound for an identical destination. He found his voice. "I—is Dr. Zandren in?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her features underwent a subtle rearrangement. Her eyes grew, thoughtfully. "I really can't answer that, you know." The syllables were deliberately measured.

Borrel blinked, disconcerted. "I—well, I got his name in the city. Dr. Zandren's name. I was told he could—that he might—that I—Can I possibly make an appointment? With Dr. Zandren?"

She drew a bound ledger from the desk. "I can give you an appointment." She studied his face, pursed her lips. "With the man upstairs."

"The man upstairs?" Borrel echoed, hollowly.

She nodded. "Can you stay now?"

"But—who is the man up there?"

She shrugged delicately. "He has been living in Dr. Zandren's house, using Dr. Zandren's office facilities, seeing Dr. Zandren's patients. Most people would consider him Dr. Zandren. Don't you think?"

Borrel bit his lip, perplexed. "But you're his office nurse. What's your opinion?"

She shook her head. "I'm *the* office nurse. I've been employed here less than two weeks." The appointment log was open on the desk. Her pencil hovered. "You will stay, won't you?"

From the center of turmoil, he grasped at rationality. Finally, dizzily, he nodded.

"Your name?"

"Behric. Borrel Behric."

She wrote. "Sit down, Mr. Behric. I'll go prepare an examining room." Briskly, she withdrew.

Leaving him alone with the untidy clutter of his thoughts. He jumped up, paced.

But before he reached the peak of his anxiety, she reappeared. "You may come now, Mr. Behric."

They rode a steep staircase to a small white room lined with glass-doored cabinets. Sterile instruments lay in cold metal rows. A padded table with multiple appendages crouched at the center of the floor. Heaviness invaded the pit of Borrel's stomach. He propelled himself backward against the young woman in white.

She propped him expertly. "Step behind the screen, Mr. Behric, and slip into this gown."

He was behind the screen, a small white garment fluttering in his grasp.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is a drug problem, isn't it, Mr. Behric?"

"How—what makes you think so?"

"You seem somewhat agitated. And there are other signs."

"It—is," he admitted. He clutched the gown, eased from behind the screen, trying neither to shiver, to shake, nor to meet her eye. When finally he raised his head, he met a small, cool smile.

But they were no longer alone. The person who, entering, jelled them into tableaux, was tall, erect, master of a starchy white brow, lord of a cold flat eye. He catalogued Borrel silently, expressionlessly. Then he accepted a manila folder from the office nurse and examined it. Motioning Borrel to the edge of the padded table, he plugged the earpieces of a dangling instrument into his head. "You may return to your billings, Yamashita."

Yamashita spoke quietly. "I believe I will remain while you examine this patient, Doctor."

The doctor raised his head, his eyebrow, favored her with a long, chilly stare.

Smiling, she pressed a metal stud on the thick earpiece of her glasses. From one corner of the heavy frames, a small lens appeared, whining.

The doctor studied her, her lens. Irritation stiffened his humorless white face. "Remain then," he said ungraciously. He turned. His eyes narrowed upon Borrel. "Mr. Borrel Behric. You've never been examined in this office before." The words were sharp.

Unexpectedly sharp. "I—no, I haven't."

"Then why did you come today?"

VI

BORREL groped anxiously for an answer that would convey information without betraying everything. "I—I haven't felt very well lately," he offered lamely.

"But weren't you directed to this office? Didn't someone send you here?" The physician's eyes flickered briefly, coldly to Yamashita.

Borrel grappled for comprehension, unsuccessfully. "I, well, I got your name from a medic I saw yesterday. He told me you accepted private patients. He advised me to come, strongly. I—I hope it wasn't unethical for me to come here."

Expression appeared briefly, unreadably, in the gray eyes. "No, of course not." Before Borrel could pull back, the cold bell of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

physician's instrument was pressed against Borrel's forcibly bared chest. "Inhale."

Rigidly, Borrel inhaled.

"Exhale."

Borrel exhaled. The bell leap-frogged, planted cold metal feet here, there. Then there were other instruments, abetted by fingers as cold, as inflexible as sterilized steel. The physician moved as he worked, interposing himself always between Borrel and the whining lens of Yamashita's spectacles. Circling, the office nurse reached Borrel's head. She moved near. Her lens closed upon the physician's rapidly discoloring face.

The doctor's fingers dug Borrel's abdomen fiercely. Then he stepped back. "I have completed this examination," he declared harshly.

Hurriedly, Borrel slid off the table, stared at the two of them. Their eyes were locked, their faces set with the intensity of silent conflict.

The physician regained control and his face snapped back into mask. His eyes touched Borrel coldly. "You need prescriptions. You may as well dress while I write them."

Borrel disappeared precipitately behind the screen. There he hunched stiffly, fighting to still his racketing heart, straining to overhear whatever exchange occurred between physician and nurse.

But there was no exchange. There were no words. No accusations, recriminations. There was only the brief sound of feet, the rustle of a skirt, silence. Whatever their issue, they did not hash it now.

Straightening, Borrel pulled on his clothes, emerged again.

The physician bent over his counter, prescription pad assiduously shielded from Yamashita's whining lens. "You'll have to drop these at Health Service. Have them entered directly on your medicard."

Borrel tried to read the physician's half-turned face. Gathering courage, he said, boldly, "Sir, I would like to be told what is wrong with me."

The doctor raised his head slowly, studied Borrel expressionlessly. "A typical constellation of symptoms," he said finally, dryly. "With proper medication, you should be restored to your normal equilibrium within twenty-four hours."

"Then—you mean there's nothing wrong with me? Actually?" Borrel ventured, his mouth drying.

"I wouldn't be prescribing if there were nothing wrong, Mr. Behric. Would I?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Borrel flushed. "I—no, I guess not. I just wanted to find out." His voice tailed away. He had wanted to find out. Yes. But what?

The physician drew an envelope from a drawer, stuffed it with prescriptions, sealed it. "Four visits to the medicmat, Mr. Behric. Four visits, and you'll have no more worries. Isn't that enough?"

Borrel stared at the envelope. His tongue touched his lips. Four visits to the medicmat, and his hands would stop shaking. Four visits, and the world would fold back against the walls again. Four visits, and the sky would be a ceiling, not a big blue void. Four visits and—

His head snapped up. He heard raw despair in his voice. "But I can't use the medicmat. I can't step into a booth," he wailed. Miserably, he unfolded the tale of his trauma.

Yamashita's lens was on his face again, focusing tight on his anguish.

The doctor raised one eyebrow, unimpressed. "A somewhat unusual situation. But not so unusual that it can't be dealt with." Stepping across the room, he keyed open a metal cabinet. From a sealed container, he counted half a dozen pink capsules into a plastic cylinder. "A quarter hour before your medication is due, go to the 'mat lounge and take one capsule. Wait in the lounge until your wrist alarm alerts you. Then proceed directly to the booth.

"There may be brief anxiety the first time, a twinge the second. But by the time you reach the third capsule, you should be completely deconditioned."

With a rattle, the plastic cylinder was in Borrel's hand. His fingers closed on it, clasped security refound, clasped emancipation from anxiety, clasped order and predictability.

Clasped relief, blessed relief.

But his mind wouldn't stop working. Had any of his questions been answered? Did he know anything he had not known an hour ago? Did he know why the physician offered an envelope stuffed with prescriptions? Did he know why his own hand, shaking, reached out?

The transaction, unfortunately, aborted. Yamashita's hand reached too. "I will examine those first, Doctor."

The envelope was immediately withdrawn. The physician's eyes were cold, hard. "And by what authority do you make that request, Yamashita?"

Yamashita bared her teeth, bared also the dull copper badge

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pinned to the backside of her lapel. "By right of my authority as a charter member and volunteer-field agent of The Liberated. Unit Seventy-two."

"The Liberated?" The doctor raised a disdainful eyebrow. "A loose association of addicts, habituates, dependents and various other assorted neurotics. Your organization has no authority whatsoever, Yamashita."

"*Former* addicts, habituates and dependents, Doctor," she said, undaunted. "And we have a great deal of moral authority. Which I am evoking now. I will examine the prescriptions you have written for this man." Her hand was unwavering.

"NO, I don't believe you will." Deliberately the physician thumbed open the envelope, removed the prescription slips. Methodically, he ripped them, dropped them in scraps into the waste chute. "Mr. Behric, on the perhaps unrealistic assumption that you came here in good faith, I will have these prescriptions entered upon your card through other channels. There will be a charge for that service, of course." His eyes swung, iced. "Miss Yamashita, you are discharged, effective immediately. If you remain upon these premises for longer than five minutes, I will have the tract security team remove you."

Yamashita's lens squealed. She touched a second stud, and the tiny mechanism withdrew into her earpiece. "Very well, Doctor. I will leave. Because even without examining those slips, I have learned what I came to learn."

The physician cocked his head. "And what was that, Yamashita?" he inquired distantly.

Her dark eyes fired. "I have learned, sir, that you are not Dr. Zandran."

His brow rose. "But of course, Yamashita, I *am* Dr. Zandren."

"No." She shook her head decisively. "Unit Seventy-two has maintained a roster of reliable local private physicians for several years now. Men to whom we can send troubled individuals for sound advice and care. Dr. Zandren's name, without his ever being aware of the fact, was prominent on the list. To our knowledge, Dr. Zandren never fostered or encouraged dependence upon drugs. He never substituted pharmaceutical crutches for concerned medical attention. He rendered the finest and most personal medical care.

"Then about two months ago, it came to our attention that there

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had been a change of policy in this office. We sent two 'patients' from our ranks, but they weren't able to discern why policy had changed. So when your office nurse began maternity leave earlier this month, I approached the employment agency and purchased her job. I wanted the opportunity, of course, to perform a close-range investigation.

"Now I have reached my conclusion. You do bear a close physical resemblance to Dr. Zandren, if I am to judge from his photographs. And you have carried out your impersonation with authority. But after two weeks of observing your practice, and particularly after seeing how you handled Mr. Behric's case, I'm prepared to commit myself: you are not Dr. Niles Zandren."

Unexpectedly, tightly, the physician smiled. "Yamashita, I have something that will interest and perhaps even amuse you. Join us in my office, Mr. Behric."

The office was paneled, dim. The doctor palmed a wallplate. Light appeared. Smiling unpleasantly, he drew a cardboard tube from his desk. He slid a coiled paper from the tube, unrolled it.

Yamashita accepted the paper. Her eyes traveled it guardedly. Her lips tightened. Finally she returned the paper. "I see," she said, her voice hollow. "You are Dr. Zandren after all."

The doctor nodded. "I am indeed. And I have been for almost four months, Yamashita. Mr. Behric, won't you examine this document too?"

Mystified, Borrel accepted the paper, stared at words which declared that by court order the man who possessed this document, the former Helmann Twist, Medical Doctor, was now legally designated Niles G. Zandren, Medical Doctor, and was entitled thereafter to all privileges, considerations and properties normally held by Niles G. Zandren, M.D.

Utterly perplexed, Borrel stared up at Niles G. Zandren, M.D. The document curled in his hand.

Dr. Zandren removed it, coiled it back into its tube. "Yes, I am Dr. Niles Zandren. And in your two weeks here, Yamashita, you have not witnessed me in the commission of any unethical or illegal transaction. Because I have performed none. In the case of Mr. Behric, for instance, I have prescribed perfectly legitimate pharmaceuticals for his very real, readily measurable symptoms."

Yamashita's eyes glinted. "If that's true, Dr. Twist, rewrite those prescriptions and let me examine them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His smile went. "Dr. Zandren. And to reiterate, I do not recognize the authority you claim here. When I prescribed for Mr. Behric, I did so in accordance with currently acceptable medical practice. And as a medical doctor fully licensed for private practice, I am answerable to no one other than Health Service."

"Which is administered by men who sit smack in the big, soft pockets of the drug makers," she said abrasively. "And sit damn comfortably, too. Taking full advantage of a system that allows them to peddle more and higher-priced drugs than ever before to people who can absorb units eight times a day without suffering damage to their personal credit balances. Because the bill, after all, is paid from public funds.

"And over the past twenty-five years, the drug industry has bent a lot of effort persuading the public that drugs are not only as free as air—but just as essential. And by the way, Dr. Zandren, whatever happened to the other Dr. Zandren? The original Dr. Zandren?"

Dr. Zandren peered down his nose, coldly. "He suffered a coronary. His body has been carefully preserved in a local mausoleum. If your group cares to push post-mortem proceedings, they will find that his death was indeed due to the causes stated on his death certificate. Which I have in my desk drawer, Miss Yamashita."

Yamashita's glance scorched him. "Your people considered everything, didn't they?"

"Of course," he said readily. "Had the body been cremated, your organization, or some similar group, could have raised a number of awkward doubts, cast some very damaging aspersions. Fortunately, we can at any time produce the body and prove that my predecessor did indeed die of coronary disease."

Borrel frowned, trying painfully to patch together just one rational, articulate question.

Too late. Dr. Niles G. Zandren glanced at his wristlog. His lips tightened. "I believe I gave you five minutes, Yamashita. They are almost gone. And so are yours, Mr. Behric. I'm sorry to be abrupt, but I cannot help feeling that there is a connection between your presence here and Miss Yamashita's organization."

Yamashita's eyes filled with impotent wrath. Then they emptied, and she bared her teeth in a brief, chilly smile. "Well, it's been nice working with you, Dr. Zandren. Unit Seventy-two will bring whatever power it possess to bear on you, and you will see if we are as insignificant as you think." She turned sharply. "Come along,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Behric. Best we go. The doctor has to make his hospital rounds."

The physician's starchy face affirmed the finality of the dismissal. Borrel followed the nurse, the cylinder of capsules in his hand.

VII

DOWNSTAIRS, Yamashita retrieved a large, dark bag. Then they were on the street, the physician's door shut with finality behind them.

"I still don't understand why they replaced Dr. Zandren that way," Borrel said querulously.

"To prescribe for his patients," Yamashita said crisply, setting off down the sidewalk. "Any private practice is heavily weighted with older patients who simply won't take their medicine without a big helping of personal attention. Many of them, in fact, take their medicine only to earn the doctor's approval.

"Of course, the genuine Dr. Zandren prescribed only as strictly necessary. But Dr. Twist has stepped up business. The records I have examined show that during the past few months, each patient who has come in for care has gone out with at least one new—and usually superfluous—prescription. In most cases, one of the very new mood benders.

"And at the prices those people are paying for their new medication, the industry can well afford to maintain Dr. Twist here."

Borrel frowned. "You mean it's a conspiracy? The drug industry is conspiring with AutoHealth to turn us all, everyone, into druggers?"

"The drug industry hardly has to conspire," Yamashita said dryly. "It makes its wares available. People are easily conditioned. Then it's just a matter of maintaining a profitable status quo."

Borrel bobbed along beside her, lost in the troubling maze of his thoughts. When he looked up again, they approached the gate. And she extended her hand for their parting handshake.

His hand was limp in hers. She turned. Then he was calling after her. "Wait! Please!"

She turned, waited impassively.

Intention blazed in his mind, declared itself: "*I* want to join!"

Her eyes grew behind her thick lenses. She regarded him owlishly.

"I want to join the organization you belong to. The one that's trying to change the situation. I—I have to have help."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She touched her heavy frames. "Mr. Behric, the only person who can help you now is yourself."

"But there must be someone," he protested. "Someone in your organization. If you don't want me for a full member, I could just come to meetings. Sit in. Listen. I could—"

She pursed her lips sternly. "I'm very sorry. But we don't admit druggers."

He froze, slapped with the word.

Exasperated, she softened her blow. "Mr. Behric, believe me, if you were an obvious addict, I wouldn't leave you. I'd see that you had help immediately in large doses."

He still stood numb.

"But I really can't consider you much more than moderately dependent. And the very best help for a dependency problem, the only real help, must come from within. From you. You must tap your own resources. You must make up your own mind to give up your crutch. Because there is nothing wrong with your legs. Nothing at all wrong."

He stared at her, open-mouthed. Then his hand was thrust stiffly between them. "No, look! I'm shaking. I've been shaking for—for hours. And I'm sweating. And my arms and legs ache. And I'm dizzy. And everything has *changed*. All around me I see—"

"Of course everything has changed. Your body is making a readjustment. Your entire physiology is out of gear, and it will be for several days. The newer drugs are like that—they have a hook that catches in the flesh.

"But it's only a flesh wound. Believe me, if you were addicted, you wouldn't be standing here arguing. You'd be home rolling on the floor, cramping and vomiting."

"But—"

"And then there is the matter of anxiety and tension. You've gotten out of shape for handling them. You've been spraying them instead of wrestling them. You're weak now. Until you pull your psychic muscles into tone again, it's going to be rough. But you were able to handle your problems for yourself once, weren't you? Before you hit the 'mat path?"

Dumbly, he nodded. It was true.

"All right. Then it's up to you to learn to handle them again. And if you can do it, if you can stay clear of the medicmat for ten consecutive weeks, then I'll give you an introduction into The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Liberated. Because after ten weeks, you can consider yourself liberated."

"Ten? Ten *weeks*?" he echoed, unbelievingly.

"It's not so long. I did it once."

He stared at her across the broad crevasse of ten weeks. "But even if I can make it ten weeks, how could I find you again?"

"I'll find you," she said. "We have people in every division of AutoHealth—public contact, stocking, diagnostics, dispensing. I'll pass your name along, and your file will be monitored. If you can stay away from the 'mat for ten weeks, I'll hear about it, and I'll contact you. Immediately."

This time, her handshake was final. She departed, withdrew through the gate, boarded the strip, slid away.

He sagged, abandoned, Heavily, he turned, moved back to the edge of the small pond.

Ten weeks.

Ducks tweaked his anklets. He peered moodily into the shallow waters, trying to find strength there.

Ten weeks.

Or forever. There wasn't much difference.

But Yamashita said she had done it once, faced ten weeks without her units, emancipated herself.

WAS Yamashita stronger than he?

She was not. Frowning, he moved along the banks of the pond, suddenly fierce with the need to nurture a tiny seedling of resolve. He paced, and the small plant sent out anemic tendrils that groped for a hold in the earth. He trudged, and a single green leaf unfolded, a vulnerable little banner. He scuffed, and gradually the sprout grew sturdy and tall. And decision was his.

He *would* be free. He would be strong. He would toss away the cylinder of pink capsules. Then he would strip directly to his rooms and remain there, sequestered, for a day, for two, for however many it took him to liberate himself from the cobwebs that bound him. He would not answer calls. He would discard whatever urgent-seeming summons appeared in his inbin. Nothing would budge him.

He halted, drew breath. The surface of the pond was flat, still. But he would shatter it now, fragment it with the cylinder he warmed in his hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Unfortunately, before he could raise his arm, a dark whisper paralyzed him.

"We know it was someone that works out of AutoHealth. We know that much already. So what was his name? Who sent you to Zandren?"

Borrel turned, stiffly. The person who spoke was shadowy, grayed around the edges. But his eyes were twin flames, small, fierce, orange.

"You may as well spill, Borrie. Because we'll find out, we will. Just give me his level. Tell me what echelon he works on."

Borrel shrank from the hoarse whisper, his heart accelerating. Vennl. He recognized the query, and it came from Vennl. The shadow came from Vennl.

Surveillance came from Vennl.

Vennl of the sharp teeth. Vennl, dug into the hide of the mammoth drug industry, sucking. Vennl, machinating now to track whoever worked against the interest of the pharmaceutical titan he fed on.

Borrel's voice shook. "I'll never tell. I know what's going on now. I know what's been done to me and a lot of others. But it's not going to be done to me any more. I'm quitting. Right now."

"Yeah? That's what this guy told you? Kick your units? Drop out of the 'matrace and run away free?"

"Nobody has to tell me now. I have my eyes open."

"Yeah? Open and screwed in backward." The orange eyes flared. "You been through the best medic machinery in the country, and it gave you a diagnosis and ordered a wad of prescriptions into your file. And you been getting good stuff. Not any cheap mist. Real spray. Then this know-it-all, this paranoiac, comes along and tells you to get back to nature.

"Back to nature?" He snorted. "You know what the life expectancy was two hundred years ago? Before the drugs started coming out? You know what it is today?"

"I don't have to know," Borrel declared. "I—"

"Yeah? You look it up, Borrie. And while you're there, you sort through a good medical dictionary and read up on all the things people used to die with. Messy things. Like cancer. All kinds of cancer. Cancer of the rectum, Borrie? They couldn't control it those days. And TB. Tuberculosis. Coughing out your lungs. Meningitis. Diabetes. Tetanus even—now there's a freak disease."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Borrel fought engulfing fear. "Look, I don't have anything wrong with me. I'm perfectly healthy. I'm—"

"Yeah? Who cleared you?" The shadow pressed near. "Who told you you don't have anything wrong? That nurse? She gave you a physical?"

Borrel backed. "No one told me. But I know. I know that the only thing wrong with me is—"

"Borrie, I can see one thing wrong with you right now. I don't even need a medical degree to put my finger on it. Wrong emotions. You got them all over your face. Your hands are shaking with them. And you can't get away with that, Borrie. You keep on feeling that way, all tied up, knotted hard, and one day your guts are going to come crawling out your mouth. You're going to tear yourself up. And then one of the bad diseases is going to move in on you. And by the time you get off your back-to-nature kick, it's going to be too late."

Borrel was backed against the evergreen, wedged against the callbooth that nestled there.

"You're going to rot, Borrie. Did you get his name? The guy who sent you here?"

Desperately, Borrel wagged his head.

"Make me a descrip then. How old? How big? Dark? Light?"

His eyes glazing, Borrel still shook his head. "I won't tell you. I'll—I'll never tell you!" His voice said it was true.

The shadow drew back, sucked in its edges. The orange eyes lost fire. "Okay, you won't tell. No worry. We'll spot him. Because he'll keep it up. He'll keep on talking wise to our patrons, and we'll find out who he is." His eyes smoldered briefly. Then he was edging away, beginning to lose identity, to become once again a dim gray obscurity.

Borrel escaped the corner of trunk and callbooth. "What are you going to do? When you do find him?"

The orange eyes brightened. A dozen nasty yellow teeth glinted. "Kid, we'll chop off his prescriptions. And then we'll see how long he holds out.

"And you take my advice, Borrie. If you want to be an old man like me some day, get those emotions back under control. The right way. You know what I mean."

Borrel shuddered violently, suddenly hollow, ringing with cold. He knew. He knew what erosive forces worked through the emo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tions. He knew what stress, strain and racking care did to body as well as to soul.

He stumbled out the gate, straddled the sliding strip, rode away, his entire body rigidifying, his neck and shoulders taut, his head beginning to ache and pound. He clutched his temples. He knew what emotion did.

But Yamashita. Yamashita had said something.

What?

What: that once, before, he had been able to handle his emotions himself, unaided. He had been able to manage his anxieties, adapt to tension and stress. Without spray.

Well, it was true. He remembered it. He had passed most of his life without spray. He had passed more than twenty years.

And that meant he could do it again. He could learn to live without medispray again. He could kick the unit habit. He could take care to himself, deal with it, dismiss it.

And if he were to believe the medic and Yamashita, it would take only a few weeks. He had only to avoid the 'mat for that long. Old habits would reassert themselves, and he would be self-sufficient again.

He took a deep breath, and resolve became his again. He was entering the pink, lavender and buttercup precincts of the exurb now, and there was a disposer just a square ahead. His first step was to feed it the cylinder of pink capsules. Then ride ahead, across the river, seek his own rooms. Isolate himself. Fight the shadows alone. Wrestle the cobwebs and demolish them. Vanquish craving, weakness, fear.

The strip moved, and the disposer was no longer a square ahead, no longer half a square. It was a dozen yards, a dozen feet. The moment was almost his.

And he *would* seize it. He *would* stand strong and free again. He would liberate himself from Vennl, from the drug industry, from AutoHealth itself. He would toss away the small container that rattled in his fist, the container that could too easily link his arm to the well again.

He *would*.

If only he could raise his arm.
If only he could unclench his fingers.
If only . . . .

∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PERFECT MATCH

Roger Dee

A despot from farthest space stakes his invincibility against a lovesick earthling . . .

THE T'sai—which translates as *The Lord* to an infinite range of awe and abasement on a million planets—came to Sam Whitney's world by accident.

The Lord T'sai rulled a galaxy twice removed from Sam's, and in his power and arrogance had no experience with accident. The ship in which he fell toward Earth, with his lowly Sloor servant and his hundred-odd crew of less-than-dirt menials, was proof against any but the millions-to-one miracle that makes possible, by sheer random chance, collision between a meteor and a jetliner.

An impervious shell of energy, the ship flashed through ultraspace

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at an immaterial exponent of the speed of light, bearing its master-and-slave complement on a mission whose magnitude would have been totally incomprehensible to Sam Whitney—or to Clara, who was Sam's wife and who would have felt even less interest than Sam in an alien, ectoplasmic castaway.

For that matter, neither of the Whitneys was concerned with anything at the moment beyond Sam's return home after two years of the undeclared farce in southeast Asia. But that is for later; the Lord T'sai and Churvil, his faithful Sloor servant, come first.

These two had begun life together in accordance with T'sai convention, which requires the simultaneous hatching of T'sai and Sloor eggs, some alien spans of time earlier which would have meant nothing whatever to the Whitneys because even the mathematics of the T'sai universe differs from Earth's as widely in nature as T'sai and Sloor eggs differ in color and heredity.

Therein lay one of the essential differences that made one a galactic lord and the other a dedicated menial, for the T'sai egg was a bold and arrogant blue, giving forth an ectoplasmic curl of bluish mist at hatching time. Churvil, being a Sloor, issued from his motley egg as a cringing, pinkish fog.

Each was guided at birth, his first entry into a flesh-and-blood host, into the inhalant orifices of their respective carriers. The T'sai's host was the most graceful of his galaxy's available life forms; the Sloor was shoddily, but gratefully, housed in an uglier, fewer-tentacled shape.

Thereafter, master and slave lived their lives together, inseparable, transferring together to new hosts when the old bodies flagged, or when the Sloor's host began to bud in preparation for progeny. The T'sai host was never allowed to bud; the connotations, to one of a master race, were too unthinkably obscene.

The improbable catastrophe that overtook the T'sai ship came in the form of an inexplicable and indescribable reverse convolution— a kind of kink, if you will—in the fabric of subspace. The ship's energy pattern was shattered on impact, its suddenly materialized hull flung like a crumb of sparkling chaff into normal space and into the grip of Sam Whitney's world.

There was no nonsense about saving the crew. The Lord T'sai gauged the planet-shape flashing upward and waved an imperious tentacle.

"Destroy yourselves," he mentated.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Obediently, they filed into the ship's destruct chamber and were whiffed away to nothingness. To Churvil the Sloor, who hovered near in perpetual solicitude, the T'sai said, "Eject us. You may choose a host."

The starship flamed to incandescent oxides in Earth's atmosphere. A small force-shell lifeboat darted before it and struck squarely in the center of the Harmon City airport, where Clara Whitney waited in breathless impatience for her Sam.

The flash and blast of the lifeboat's collapsing force field left a six-foot crater, a cloud of dust and smoke and two small clouds, blue and pink, which drifted with the wind into a stunned handful of spectators and found hosts.

SAM and Clara Whitney were that rarest of matrimonial miracles, a perfectly matched couple. Sam was twenty-six, nearly six feet tall, black-haired, good-looking enough and as bright as a young man needs to be who vulcanizes automobile tires at a retreading shop for a living. He was reasonably honest and irritable only on occasion.

Clara was Sam's feminine counterpart, a big girl with dark red hair from not-too-recent Irish ancestry who nursed a single-minded fidelity to her man that was as remarkable as their physical congruity.

For they had found in the beginning, during their first year of marriage before Sam's draft number came up, that physical compatibility is the firmest basis for cohabitation (in both its principal senses) and were, without knowing it, as perfectly matched a pair of lovers as history has produced, not excluding Paris and Helen.

Their interests were nearly enough alike to permit the blooming of empathy. When they made love, which was often and earnestly, it was with an abandoned completion that made any thought of extramarital adventure ridiculous.

Even during Sam's two-year hitch in Vietnam this held true. Such fidelity of passion can be a liability; several times, in the stillness of swamp nights, Sam narrowly missed dying from thinking of Clara and of the year they had spent together. It is hard to stay alert for the little brown enemy when your traitorous memory is busy with a junoesque red-haired mate and your too-perfect recall plays dirty tricks on your libido and your breathing gets short just from remembering. . . .

Clara lost sleep, too, but held true to her man, knowing in her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heart that nothing lasts forever and that the catching-up would make the two years less than nothing.

Their longed-for reunion misfired by the narrowest of margins.

Sam's plane was circling the field when catastrophe struck. Twenty minutes would have seen them in each other's arms; another twenty would have placed them securely at home in their apartment at the corner of Fourth and Cherry Streets, with Clara's dachshund locked on the screened-in back porch and all shades drawn.

But the T'sai ship, by that millions-to-one fluke of chance, chose that precise instant to plow headlong into that contradictory anomaly—the kink—in subspace, and to fling two alien castaways, via force-shell lifeboat, into their lives.

The flash of energy conversion from the life-shell's crash blinded Sam's pilot briefly, just long enough to cause him to lose control. The plane landed clumsily, lurched drunkenly and did a mastodonic headstand in the dust.

Four persons in the crowd were injured, one fatally. Sam Whitney was unhurt, but a random knock on the head left him briefly senseless.

A perspiring ambulance crew seized him, along with other casualties scooped up from the smoking ground, and rushed him directly to Harmon City's hospital.

Away from Clara, whose considerable feminine strength failed to win through the crowd in time to prevent his going.

SAM awoke in a white hospital bed with a thermometer in his mouth and an intern holding his hand. He had no conception whatever of what had happened, but knew immediately where he was.

"Where the hell is my wife?" he bellowed. "*Clara*!"

Attendants in the hallway outside tried as vainly to cope with Clara, who had tailgated the ambulance all the way to the hospital. Hearing her man's voice raised, she suffered cold visions of amputation or worse.

"*Sam*!" she cried.

A flying wedge of nurses, leaving other charges for the greater emergency, swarmed into the corridor to contain her assault.

Clara was a big girl, not easily contained. Turmoil ensued.

Sam Whitney made a heroic effort to escape his healers, whose ranks had just been swelled by two convalescing patients and a perspiring Gray Lady.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A hospital guard from the emergency entrance joined the corridor forces holding Clara at bay. A stand-off followed, with Clara calling panic-stricken questions and Sam bellowing profane answers.

Eventually, with stalemate, a measure of calm descended.

"I'm all right," Sam called to Clara's bobbing red head above the corridor melee. "Go home and lock up that damn dog. I'll be there as soon as these idiots let go of me."

Half tearful, totally angry, Clara went.

It was dark when she reached home. Street lights came on at the corner of Fourth and Cherry Streets. Traffic dwindled; television screens glowed dispassionately through neighborhood windows.

Time dragged.

Clara went to her door a dozen times, sure that it was Sam's eager tread she heard on the stairs. The fear began to haunt her that Sam, though not really injured, might be kept at the hospital overnight. If that happened now, after two miserable years of waiting . . .

She called the hospital four times before ten o'clock, without result. Finally, to break the motonony of vigil, she made ready for bed.

She showered carefully for Sam, finding satisfaction in the toweled pinkness of her long-limbed body. She chose her newest, sheerest nightgown, bought two weeks ago for this occasion when Sam first wired of his pending discharge. She turned back the covers of their bed with its gleaming white sheets, turned to its lowest glow the little table lamp with its scalloped shade.

Then, as if fate had relented finally, the telephone rang and Sam's voice was quick and eager in her ear.

"Get set, doll," Sam said. "I'm on my way."

THE T'sai knew in the first cataclysmic instant of his new occupancy that something was wrong.

How dreadfully wrong he could not know at first, for he had no basis for comparison. Not one of his countless transfers in the past, each necessarily entailing the death of a castoff host, had prepared him for a host mind that had no neuronic seat of control, no maze of standard nerve nodes designed by millennia of breeding specifically for his manipulation.

He had never imagained opposition to his entry nor conceived of resistance to his occupancy. But this—

The mind of the creature he had invaded was a roaring holocaust of raw emotion, swept by a storm of red anger that peaked steadily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like a mounting hurricane. Nothing in the Lord T'sai's experience, nor in the eons of experience of his kind before him, had hinted even at the probability of such a situation.

A giddy time passed in the maelstrom before he realized first that his new carrier was already occupied and then that host and body were no more than different manifestations of the same entity.

It was its own master. Preposterously, it was somehow so firmly joined that his entry had made not the slightest rift in its linkage.

The creature did not even sense his presence. Its rage was directed elsewhere, toward others of its kind who held prisoner another bound by some outlandish web of custom to his host.

The T'sai gave ground under the strain, finding the dual entity too grossly powerful for unseating.

There was an alternative; below and behind the brawling foremind lay another, calm as a river by comparison, unconcerned with angry trivia. It pulsed quietly with a purposeful rhythm, to all intents too busy with primary body functions to consider the first.

The T'sai slipped into that smooth well of subconsciousness with a relief that might have approached gratitude if the concept had been known to him. He rested there with the storm of sensation blowing above him like wind over a roof, sensing the course of feeling to which his host was heir: tactile, olfactory, auditory, the gamut of the alien creature's responses.

Time confirmed his first stricken conviction; this was truly an alien universe, beyond T'sai experience or conception of experience, where unimaginably lusty life followed its own wild laws and every creature's mentality was one with the somatic complex that housed it.

Sharing each, the T'sai found himself understanding explicitly his host's functional needs and desires, the systematic circulation that fed its cellular structure, ingestion and absorption, degeneration and death and perpetuation of the species.

The concept of bisexual reproduction horrified him beyond definition of horror; the drive, so primitive; the process of fulfillment, so explicit. Contemplation of it was more than stellar royalty could bear.

"*Churvil!*" he called, forgetting for the moment that there was no help, that Churvil, like himself, had taken a host from the crowd at the airfield. Churvil, weak and stupid, spineless, cringing, would have his own crisis, or would by now have succumbed to the shock of this new life.

He must leave this clamorous body, destroying it, trusting to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chance to find another habitable host before his vulnerable ectoplasmic form expired. It was his only course; at worst he would cease to be, a condition infinitely preferable to what he glimpsed through the lurid subconscious images that thronged about him.

True panic gripped him when he turned with automatic assurance to discontinue the life processes of his host, as he had done so many times before from need, whim or boredom, and found again no vantage point of control.

The dual-entity of bonded consciousnesses still functioned, completely unaware of his presence. He was trapped without possibility of escape.

His host moved suddenly, sitting upright in bed, every sense alert. Its heart raced with expectancy. Through its ears the T'sai heard the sound of footsteps on the stairway, hurrying down the hall, straight toward the door of the room in which he—and the creature whose every sensation he now shared to its shattering peak—lay.

The door fastening turned. The portal began to open.

The T'sai's will broke. He had called upon his Sloor before as a response to need, a reflex as natural as breathing. He called again now, in utter terror.

"*Churvil!*" he screamed.

And remembered again that Churvil had hosted, as he had, in the crowd so soon dispersed under the impact of that monstrous, clumsy artifact that had plunged from the sky to create further havoc.

Churvil would be as helpless as he, trapped and unreachable.

The door opened.

Sam Whitney came into the room and stood with one hand on the doorknob, his eyes drinking in the sight of Clara—red-haired dream now in the flesh, two-year memory made real again and pantingly attainable—sitting breathless in the half light.

He was not alone.

The T'sai realized the truth in that moment, remembering injured bodies placed in the airfield ambulance—Sam Whitney's among them—and carried away. Churvil's host had died there; transference had been inevitable.

And Churvil, like Sam Whitney, was coming home to his own, desired above any other in the whole vast, starry universe. His devotion glowed in Sam's eyes, quivered in the huskiness of Sam's voice when they spoke.

"*Darling.*" they said. ∞

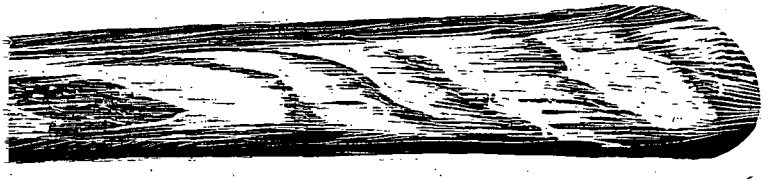
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON VENUS THE THUNDER PRECEDES THE LIGHTNING

David Duncan

To make war, first make peace. And to make love . . . ?



AS I walked through the dusk to attend Terence Monkhouse's lecture, I could see the planet Venus poised as the evening star in the green afterglow of sunset, a sight that will never fail to move me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deeply. But even had the sky been black and dumping buckets of rain, I'd still have gone to hear Monkhouse. He was the one man in all the world who might solve my problem.

Terence Monkhouse is a man I admire. Unlike other astronauts I've known—men of courage, intelligence and indisputable technical ability—Monkhouse is in addition a romantic and a philosopher—an unpredictable chap, pedantic it's true, but ebullient and emotionally vulnerable, qualities that almost terminated his career. I sat at the rear of the auditorium where he couldn't be startled by a glimpse of my face and prepared to listen.

I wasn't surprised when he began his speech with a philosophical reference although he himself seemed aware of the impropriety of doing so in these days when the entire intellectual past of the human race is viewed with skepticism. At least he'd chosen the right philosopher—the greatest skeptic of them all, David Hume.

YOU may find it odd that I should go back to the Age of Johnson to seek a rationale for my experiences on Venus (Monkhouse said after the usual introductory banalities) but it's necessary if I'm to be understood. Certain viewpoints from the past, almost lost to us through the jungle of contemporary controversy, can suddenly blaze forth like supernova when experience reestablishes their original meanings. So with David Hume and his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Throughout that essay, Hume questions that any human intelligence can know cause-and-effect relationship in advance of actual experience or observation. I won't insist that you agree with him when he says, "Our idea of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other." But I do ask you to heed his warning when he states further, "We have no argument to convince us that objects which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise in other instances be conjoined in the same manner, and that nothing leads us to this inference but custom or a certain instinct of our nature, which it is indeed difficult to resist but which, like other instincts, may be fallacious and deceitful."

You'll appreciate this warning when I tell you that shortly after our arrival on Venus, we were treated to a Venusian thunderstorm.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Those who've known only the tempests of our sunny earth can scarcely imagine the atmospheric fury on that cloud-draped planet. From horizon to horizon the sky blazed with a continuous barrage of lightning strokes while the thunder kept up a deafening cadence of explosions and rumblings for more than an hour. So intermingled were the flashes of light and the bursts of sound that it was only when the storm began to diminish that its nature struck me as very peculiar.

I watched; I listened. I experienced a sudden chill as one does when an event occurs that's totally contrary to a law of nature. The event was not in itself frightening—no more so than if your pencil should rise from your desk of its own accord and drift out the window. You'd be in no danger. The pencil isn't going to hurt you. But if you witnessed such a thing, you'd perhaps experience a chill.

My own chill was due to the relationship between the lightning and the thunder and after waiting long enough to be sure my senses weren't at fault, I turned to a young Venusian scholar who had already mastered enough English and taught me enough Venusian to make communication pleasant.

"Am I imagining it?" I said—though I knew I was not. "It seems to me that the thunder precedes the lightning. That is, I hear the thunder before I see the lightning stroke and hear no thunder after the flash."

He looked at me curiously. "Why should you think you're imagining it? It couldn't possibly be any other way."

He was completely serious and obviously found nothing odd about thunder going before lightning. He only found it strange that I should be disturbed by the phenomenon. His name is unpronounceable in English but when attempted with a full mouth sounds something like Thomas, so I came to call him that.

"But it most certainly can be another way," I said. "On Earth the lightning always precedes the thunder and it has to be that way because the lightning causes the thunder."

"Not at all," he said. "The thunder must come first because it's the thunder that causes the lightning."

WE MIGHT have ended in an absurd argument except that for the first of many times the words of the philosopher came to my rescue—the words I've already quoted, reminding us that our concepts of causal relationships arise only from observation; we can

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

never prove these relationships will always remain the same. On Venus the thunder had always come first and hence the Venusians accepted this as the only logical possibility.

Our conversation was cut short by the arrival of a Venusian with a message for Thomas. Their whispered dialogue was highly agitated and from what I understood of it, their city-state was on the verge of war. The enemy was even now advancing upon the plains outside the city where we'd been given permission to set our camp.

This development threatened our whole enterprise. We had planned to remain on Venus at least a year. Our captain, after preparing for a speedy departure should it be necessary, pointed out that our weaponry was superior to that of the Venusians and that we had a glorious opportunity to ingratiate ourselves with our present hosts by giving them whatever assistance was needed. This distressed me. It was evident from the shrieks of terror coming from the city that the inhabitants were expecting every species of calamity and that we'd have no choice but to blow the enemy to bits even though we had no notion as to what the war was about or which side was upholding the proper ideals.

Meanwhile the enemy forces came drumming onto the plain. Young men poured from the city in battle dress, to take up positions of defense. Soon the opposing armies, five or six thousand to a side, were facing each other across a hundred yards of greensward, grim and silent and awaiting only the flicker of an official finger to begin the slaughter.

I saw my friend Thomas in urgent consultation with three of his fellows. Directly the four of them stepped through the front line and moved toward the enemy. From the invading side a similar committee came forth. The groups met at midpoint on the battlefield. For the space of several minutes they engaged in a furious wielding of paper and pens and then each committee retired to its own side. Shortly thereafter the enemy marched away to the blare of trumpets and just as rapidly the local army dispersed.

"What the hell?" our captain said.

I put the same question to Thomas soon afterward.

"Ah, was it not a magnificent war!" he said. "Did you see how gallantly the enemy marched away? How courageously our own soldiers retired from their positions?"

"War?" I said. "I saw no one so much as scratched, let alone killed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What were you doing with those enemy representatives on the battlefield?"

"Signing the peace treaty, of course," he said.

"But you can't sign a treaty of peace until you've killed each other for ten or fifteen years."

He found this incomprehensible. "The treaty of peace must always come first," he insisted. "It's the initial step in all Venusian wars. It has to be that way because the terms of the treaty spell out the causes of the war and causes must always precede effects."

I clung to the words of my philosopher. (Monkhouse paused for emphasis, then resumed.) So our stay on Venus continued and I found time heavy on my hands. I was, as you know, the crew's psychiatrist. We had thought to find a desolate planet, uninhabited and unbearably hot where every man might suffer an emotional breakdown and where I would be continuously engaged in patching shattered nerves and exorcising succuba of the inner orbit. But instead the land was fair, bathed in a prepetual aurora that filled the heavy clouds with light. The stalwart specialists of our crew were happily gathering rocks, sampling the atmosphere and cataloguing the flora and fauna with not so much as a single tic among them needing my attention.

Our captain, after his first glimpse of the native women, had forbidden all fraternization with either male or female Venusians. Thomas, my friend who spoke English, was the one exception. The captain's reasons were sound. Most of the crew members had wives waiting on earth. I did not. I finally approached the captain.

"This is ridiculous," I said. "All the other men are working at their specialties while I sit in my balloon of an office wasting mine. I'm sure the people on Earth will be just as interested in this planet's inhabitants as in its rocks. I'd like your permission to study them."

The captain didn't agree that people were as interesting as rocks but when I pointed out that I, the psychiatrist, was likely to be the only crew member to suffer a nervous collapse if I remained idle, he gave his reluctant consent.

I wasted no time crossing the fields toward a Venusian cottage where there dwelt, as I had ascertained by lengthy examination with my binoculars, a young woman of extraordinary beauty, even by Venusian standards. I'll attempt no description. I only know that roses hung their heads when she passed them.

Her Venusian name, like Thomas's, is impossible in our language

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but it's not an uncommon name on Venus, as common as our Mary and so I called her that.

She was at home. We smiled at each other and when I was able to speak, I explained that I was authorized to study the Venusian people and that if she agreed, I'd commence with her.

She not only agreed—but with a quick understanding that endeared her to me the more, invited me to a party that very evening where I'd have the opportunity to observe Venusian society at play. By now I didn't find it unusual when she told me what hour she'd call for me.

I WAS not prepared, however, for the state she was in when she knocked at the door of my balloon. She was drunk. Wonderfully, appealingly drunk, but drunk all the same, laughing, quipping and dancing me all the way to the party with a happy abandon that made me abominate my sobriety. Our ship had carried no liquor and so the moment we arrived at the party, where everyone else was just as drunk as Mary, I made straight for the huge bowl of Venusian whisky determined to match her state as speedily as alcohol could pass into my bloodstream.

To my alarm she accompanied me to the bowl and began downing drink for drink with me so that I was certain she'd pass out before the evening was well started.

This did not occur. I observed, shortly before I reached a point where I could observe nothing, that with each drink she became progressively more sober. There was a glorious period of about five minutes when the two of us were at equilibrium in our intoxication and thereafter it was I who was cavorting about with a hand for every bottom and making an inebriated ass of myself before all the Venusians who, like Mary, had become more sober as the evening advanced. In the end Mary had to lead me back to my quarters where I was left with the vague memory of her gentle hands tucking me into my blankets.

I awoke with a scorching hangover, swallowed numerous pills and staggered over to her cottage to apologize. She would hear of no apology. Her concern was all for my health. She couldn't understand what had happened to me. I assured her that except for a temporary malaise my health was excellent and that what had happened to me was a common occurrence on earth. This amazed her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What a frightful waste," she said. "It's early in the evening when one is fresh and happy that intoxication is fun. The prospect of pleasure is all one needs. And then one drinks to sober up so that when the party is over and one is tired, there's no trouble getting home to a good night's sleep."

I didn't argue. On Venus the thunder precedes the lightning. But I realized I was in desperate need of further orientation before daring to advance my plans to her. For I was caught in a tempest of love and was resolved to have her for my wife and remain on Venus the rest of my days. I couldn't chance destroying this future through ignorance.

So I called in Thomas, hoping he could give me the philosophical key to Venusian behavior, both of its elements and people. And during our several conversations I believe I found that key.

The Venusians have a version of Genesis where the first man and woman—call them Adam and Eve—were placed in a garden similar to Eden, to care for it and make it prosper. The Venusian story differs from ours in one respect. Instead of being told to leave the tree of wisdom alone, the Venusian Adam was commanded to eat of its fruit daily and to see that Eve did likesie.

For a long time they did so, living in unparalleled virtue while the garden and all its creatures flourished under their supervision. Then the serpent tempted Eve, telling her of all the profane and sensuous joys she would know if she would just omit from her diet for one day the fruit that made her and Adam so wise.

As in our own version, Eve succumbed to temptation and begged Adam to join her in forsaking wisdom for a day. The result was that God found them in bestial abandonment, all responsibilities forgotten, weeds flourishing and the previously peaceful animals snarling at each other. So the two were expelled from the garden and condemned with all their descendants to lives of hard labor.

I found this opposite twist to the story significant in the highest degree. It meant that on Venus man's original sin was one of omission instead of one of commission as on earth. And Thomas enlightened me further by stating that among the Venusians failure to perform a kindness when the opportunity arose was actually considered a greater sin than to indulge in an overt unkindness.

What awesome fathoms of speculation this discovery opened before me! A slight shift in man's original viewpoint and thenceforth nature herself changed her ways! The universe was subjective after

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all, consisting in the final analysis only of our observations which would, of necessity, differ with time and place and with the personality of the primary observer. David Hume was right—and so were Bishop Berkeley and Einstein! I had the key to the seeming contradictions of Venus, not contradictions at all except to one to whom custom had given contrary mental habits. The habits I could change and a philosophy that stressed the sin of omission was one I could live with.

So I told Thomas of my love for Mary and of my determination to quit the ship, either with or without the captain's permission, if she would accept me. Not wanting to be tripped up by any earthly preconceptions, I asked him to convey this message to Mary.

He was delighted and his eyes glowed in such a secretive manner that I couldn't but suspect he stood to gain some personal end by being my messenger. But if so, this meant only that he'd be a stronger advocate.

He went to find the lady at once while I remained in my quarters to await his return. Hours passed, a full twenty-four of them which I spent in sleepless suspense before I saw him returning, a smile on his face, a bundle of some sort in his arms. I flung open my door.

"Well?" I cried. "Well?"

His smile brightened the room. "She fainted with joy when she heard my message," he said. "She yearns for you as nature yearns for a vacuum!"

Momentarily his last statement crushed me, sounding to earthly ears like the sharpest sarcasm. Then I remembered where I was. "You mean she accepts?"

"Of course she accepts. She is your wife from this moment on."

Never during our entire journey from Earth to Venus had I felt so weightless. "Oh, to hear it from her own lips!"

"No need for that," said Thomas. "She has sent you a far more binding affirmation of her wedded love than any words could convey. Here . . ." He thrust his bundle toward me, flinging aside a light covering to expose the contents. I stared. I perceived a tiny pink fist waving about; I heard the thin wail of an infant.

"What's this?" I said.

"Your child, of course."

Damn his *of course's*. "Impossible! I haven't even touched her in a sexual manner!"

"I certainly hope not," he said. "That would be most improper

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

until you've waited the full nine months to assure the legitimacy of your offspring. I can't believe that even on Earth nature allows humans the joys of cohabitation without first exercising them in the tribulations of its consequences."

"YOU'RE damned right nature allows such things on Earth!"

"Then I can well understand how those problems of overpopulation and broken marriages come about and why men of your profession are kept so busy administering to the sexually disturbed. Here on Venus we earn our pleasures in advance." His voice softened. "If what you say is true, I can well understand your frustration. But only think—nine months from now you will truly deserve your reward and can approach Mary free of any guilt and with your sexual appetite whetted a thousandfold. On Venus it's the only possible way."

Nine months! I looked at my calendar and saw that in exactly nine months our ship would start its return to earth. I could wait. I must wait. All the years thereafter she would be mine.

"Good," said Thomas. "I leave you your child." Which he did.

I had no end of trouble trying to explain the infant's presence to the captain but what he thought no longer concerned me. My mind was intent upon Mary and the calendar. For many hours of every day I stood with my binoculars trained on her cottage where she was usually visible in the doorway gazing in my direction, her face a torment of longing. She was suffering even as I, and in that knowledge I found strength to carry on.

But never did time pass so slowly and I could find no diversion to hurry its pace. This was not tedium, for every moment was haunted by my visions, real and fancied, of Mary—nor could I stop my imagination from indulging ten thousand times and in as many different ways in our ultimmate embrace.

Somehow the days passed, all of them, and at precisely ten o'clock on the final day of this inverted gestation period, I flung open my door and with passion putting wings to my feet bounded across the grassy field that had for so long been a barrier. From the distance came the blast of the spaceship's horn summoning the crew to muster for launching and it occurred to me that the summons might be for me alone, for I'd neglected to tell the captain of my decision to remain behind. To hell with him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mary awaited me trembling, her flesh blushing from white to crimson so that she outshone every flower with which she'd adorned her cottage. The couch awaited. After so long a delay in the consummation of our passion and after so prolonged a fueling of our sexual fires we raced instantly for that downy berth. I stripped naked as we crossed the room. She had met me in that state. Our only words were panted endearments until I had her locked in my arms and was, so I thought, on the point of union.

What impediment intervened I know not. I only know that she cried out, "No, no, beloved! The Venusian way!"

Oh, god, had my Earthly clumsiness marred this sublime moment? "Forgive me!" I gasped.

"You forgive me! But it has to be the Venusian way. It's the only way I know. The only way possible!"

"Then tell me quickly."

"Yes, yes. So simple. Before you begin you must first withdraw!"

Dumbfounded, I swung to a sitting position and for an eternity of perhaps a second tried to comprehend the mechanics of such an arrangement. That on Venus the thunder preceded the lightning was acceptable; that wars began with peace treaties was admirable; that people drank to sober up was admissible; that babies were born nine months before conception was endurable; but that copulation started by stopping was inconceiveable. At least to an Earth man. The second was long enough for me to know with utter certainty that comprehension of the method was forever beyond my reach.

Far away the spaceship angrily bellowed the final summons and without pausing for clothing I sped from her cottage and raced for the ship. For a while her heartbroken voice followed me. "So simple, darling! So simple!"

As you see by my presence in this hall tonight, I reached the ship in time and I shall not bore you with the terrors of our journey home, terrors brought about by the mysterious fact that our ship was one hundred and seventy pounds heavier than it had any right to be—some other effect of the Venusian environment no doubt. The captain had to lose the weight somehow and since I was within a few ounces of representing the surplus, he proposed to jettison me into space, a fate I was spared through the intercession of the other crew members. In the end the captain had to part with half his rocks and, of course, has never forgiven me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But I care not for that. During the whole of our return journey I wrestled with the problem of Venusian sexual relations and came no closer to a solution than when I sat by Mary's side. It remains a profound mystery to me although to the people of Venus no mystery at all, for connubial bliss is rampant there. And so I leave you as I began with the words of the philosopher, "We have no argument to convince us that objects which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined, will likewise in other instances be conjoined in the same manner." Good night.

THUS ended Terence Monkhouse's account of his adventures on Venus. He left the stage and the audience departed the hall. I remained in my back row seat, bitterly disappointed. For I had now known why Monkhouse deserted his Mary. I had hoped it was only because his achievement was unsatsifactory and not because he had never achieved at all. If that was his fate, what now was mine?

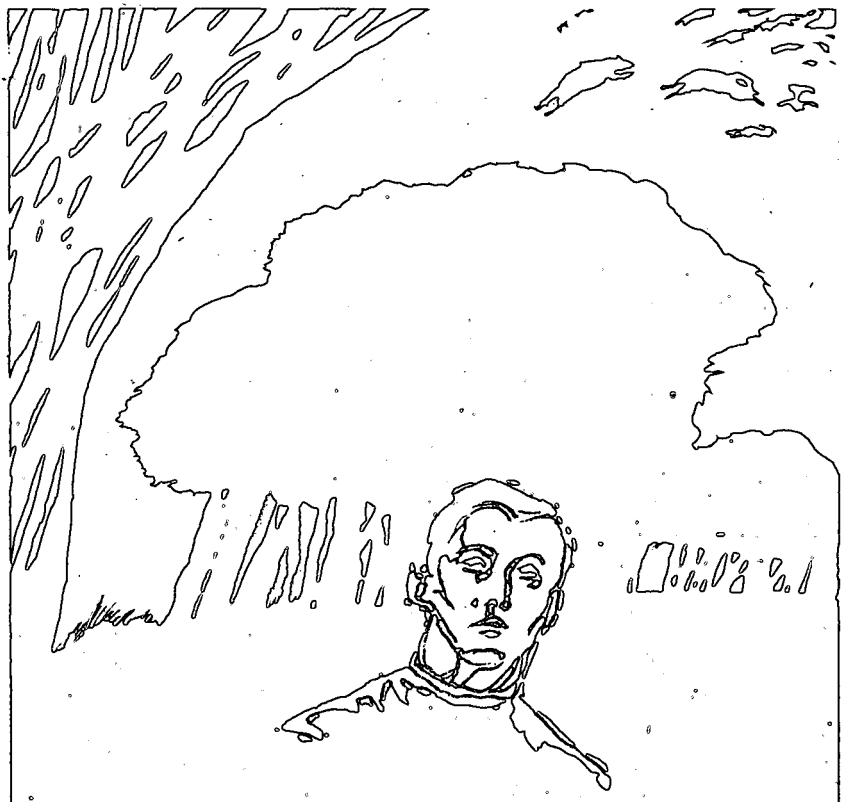
One of Monkhouse's mysteries I could have cleared up easily had I dared expose myself. The matter of the ship's extra weight is easily explained by the presence of a stowaway aboard. I know this because I was the stowaway. Yes, I am the Venusian whom Monkhouse called Thomas and I had no intention of endangering the ship. When I hid myself in her cargo, I thought Monkhouse was remaining on Venus and that my extra weight would be a necessity. I longed to visit the planet Earth and experience with my own senses a storm in which the lightning precedes the thunder.

Oh, had I but waited for the outcome of his meeting with Mary! Then I'd have had second thoughts. But to me, a Venusian, it was beyond belief that any man would find it impossible to mate with a Venusian woman. So simple. So simple.

And his failure is now mine. Here I am on an alien world with no chance of returning to my own, the taxpayers having revolted against spending so many billions on the importation of Venusian hornblend. I ought to be happy enough, for I'm young and possess all the grace and charm for which Venusians are celebrated. The women of Earth find me irrestible and I in turn am put into a constant passion by their exotic beauty. But, alas, not one of them understands that before making love I must first withdraw. So simple. So simple.

I shall not quote the philosopher. I doubt if he could help me either. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



HOLD MY HAND, MY LOVE

Michael G. Coney

When she started looking good, he knew the planet was unfit for humans . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

To: Justice Ambrose, December 12, 2086.

Supreme Court.

Subject: Gertrude Nash, deceased.

I enclose a transcript of my interview with the defendant and would like to thank you for granting me the opportunity for this examination. Obviously, I will leave you to draw your own conclusions, although I am adding a note of my own. The question of guilt is not at issue; it is merely that the circumstances of the case give rise to the possibility of a plea of temporary insanity.

Sincerely,

Adam Wight.

Who the hell are you?

Oh, a psychiatrist. Some nerve. Think I'm crazy, do you? That's why they sent you, isn't it?

I see. Guilty but insane. Is that the best sort of plea they can enter for me? O.K. . . I know you're here to help me. But insane? What sort of a stigma is that to live with?

Yes, of course I killed her. They sent another scout down, didn't they? They found the body? So it was I, I admit it. I was the only one there, after all . . .

But I loved her. Don't you realize that? I loved Gertrude Nash, possibly the plainest woman in the Pioneers. Maybe that's why they teamed me up with her, because they know I'm a man for the girls. They thought nobody would make a pass at Gertrude, not even I.

But they hadn't been on Zusam themselves.

The planet of love . . .

Why do you look at me like that, Doctor?

WE MADE a perfect landing in the little scout and, as we bounced gently on the hydraulics, Miss Nash and I looked at each other; and I swear to you, Doctor, she was the least attractive girl I ever saw. Woman, I should say; nearing forty and white at the temples be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hind a sharp nose, she looked like the prow of an old sea frigate thrusting a silver wave. Steel-rimmed glasses like searchlights and nostrils like anchor ports.

"Well, here we are, Miss Nash," I said formally, for the sake of being friendly.

She sniffed and regarded the viewport. We had landed on an extensive plain of emerald glass looking very much like a part of Wiltshire. Atmosphere, radiation, bacteria count, all needles rested within the little green segment signifying that a man could step outside and make himself at home.

Correctly, Miss Nash began to call off the readings. She was correct in everything she did. When we had finished, she stared at the viewpoint again and sniffed again. It was a sniff of deep suspicion; she mistrusted the planet Zusam despite all evidence to the contrary.

Evidence to the contrary? I'm beginning to talk like you, Doctor. Anyway, she inhaled sharply through her capacious nostrils just in the way she did when she was first introduced to me.

"You don't like the look of it?" I asked. She was ten years older than I and I felt I ought to give the impression of deferring to her experience.

"We mustn't take things for granted, Alec," she said. She took the transmitter and sent full details back to the orbiting mother ship while I sat impatient, chewing my fingernails. She watched me absently and I half expected her to tell me to stop it, as my mother used to do when I was a kid. At last we had clearance and I jumped up, making for the hatch. I spun the wheel and stepped into the tiny airlock—there's only room for one dwarf in the airlocks of our scouts—and waited while the hatch behind me swung shut with a click. They design the scouts for morons, as well as dwarfs. You can't open the outer hatch until the inner one is closed and vice versa.

At last I was able to open the outer hatch and step on to the small platform. I thumbed the button which drops the ladder. Presently I was joined by Miss Nash. We stood on the platform, about thirty feet from the ground, and surveyed the landscape.

The plain on which the scout stood was flat and close-cropped, a very shallow bowl. It spread away for about a mile in all directions; we were in the approximate center of a wide circle of forest. Behind the forest in the hazy distance, blue hills rose. The sun was warm and reassuring, like Sol's twin brother. In fact, the whole aspect of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the place was reassuring. I even felt a surge of affection for Miss Nash, as she stood blinking in the brightness.

"This place looks very pleasant, Alec," she remarked, removing her glasses and polishing them. "But we must not be misled by the appearance. There used to be tigers on Earth, remember." She almost smiled.

I think I mentioned my mother, Doctor? She's dead now, of course, but she was quite a woman in her time. At that moment on the platform Miss Nash reminded me of her, confronting a new situation with stiff-backed mistrust.

I was fifteen years old when we left Leicester with our few possessions wrested from the grasp of my father's solicitors and arrived at the monorail station at Weymouth. My mother, I remember, stood on Weymouth platform with the baggage surrounding her like ramparts and gazed suspicious defiance at our new home. To me it was an adventure to stand high on the monorail platform; over the tops of the houses and hotels I could see the blue and silver of Weymouth Bay, with the green-capped granite plateau of Portland jutting out to sea away to the right.

My mother must have seen my expression of delighted anticipation. She said, "Don't you get ideas about swimming in the deep water, Alec. You get Portugese Men-o'-war out there; sharks too, I shouldn't wonder."

Damn it, I was fifteen at the time; not exactly a child.

YOU did say you wanted me to tell you everything which led up to Gertrude Nash's death. Anything which might help; although it's difficult to know what to say, bearing in mind that you want to prove me mad.

To return to the facts of the case. Miss Nash and I descended to the ground, laden with equipment, and set off on a brief survey. At this time there was to be no attempt at exploration; just an examination of the vegetation and insects, animals if any, in the immediate vicinity of the scout. The preliminary results were unexciting, for me at least. The grass was just that; almost Earth-type, except that the roots were more fleshy. The ground was moist. Apparently the area enjoyed a heavy rainfall. The only insect we found was a slug-like creature about three inches long, whose diet seemed to consist of grass roots.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I became bored quickly; after all, I was just the pilot and bodyguard. It wasn't expected that I should become fascinated by the ecology of an alien planet, although the possibility of hitting on a place ideal for colonization intrigued me, I must admit. But I had suffered disappointments before.

Miss Nash was uninformative at first; gathering specimens, sniffing and grunting with interest, filling little jars with bits of muck and slimy things. As we were about to finish for the day, however, a diversion occurred. A small animal appeared around one of the legs of the ship, rooting and snuffling. It was about the size of a hedgehog and much the same shape, but without the spiny coat. It looked up suddenly and saw us, then it trotted away clumsily but swiftly on inturned spadelike feet.

Miss Nash became quite animated at this and chatted away as we returned to the foot of the ladder. Aware of a sensation of slight guilt—after all, I had virtually ignored the woman—I chatted back. Maybe she just needed reaching; she was shy—if I met her on her own terms we might get along a lot better during our week's stay on Zusam. I tried to understand her terminology as she described the things we had seen.

At the foot of the ladder I stepped aside to allow her to climb.

"Thank you, Alec," she said with a smile. It was the first time I had seen her smile properly; the transformation was not as grotesque as I had expected.

I averted my eyes from her legs as she ascended and found that I was clutching the gun in my pocket. I looked around suspiciously, wondering if I had heard a noise; I have learned to rely on a sort of sixth sense on these strange planets. The plain appeared empty, however, so I followed up the ladder and, after we had each gone through the rigamarole of the airlock, I joined her in the ship.

That night we talked late; speculating, as one always does on the first night, as to the nature of the world we were exploring.

In the dark, as we lay in our reclining seats, she suddenly said that she would like me to call her Gertrude. Her request came out with a rush, as though she had to say it before she changed her mind. "After all, we're here for a week," she added defensively.

My God, I thought.

We radioed details of our findings back to the mother ship and obtained permission to carry out a more extensive exploration. Early the following morning we set out across the dewy grass.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We must try to sample available food on the planet," Gertrude said. "After I've analyzed it, of course."

No amount of analysis would persuade me to eat those slugs; as we made for the forest I was hoping desperately that we would find something more appetizing. Some animal of terrestrial appearance, like a deer, for instance. On reaching the trees, however, we found everything strangely quiet, as though the entire wild life of the forest had retreated from our approach.

The trees were tall and slender, somewhat like poplars. The boughs were sparser, however, about five to a tree— and they turned upward. The dark green leaves at the tips of the branches were thick and fleshy. I picked one from where it lay on the close grass and broke it. Moisture seeped out as from a succulent.

"Careful," Gertrude warned me. "The liquid could be corrosive. Wait until I test it, before you start touching things."

Annoyed at her and myself I dropped the leaf. Although we had moved to a more friendly basis I was still finding it difficult to work with an older woman whose position, at least in the field, was superior to mine. I almost hoped for a crisis to arise, for the sake of seeing fear on her capable face. I fingered my gun, glancing around. The place was uncannily quiet. The thick leaves did not even rustle in the light breeze.

Gertrude was packing her instruments away, following an examination of a leaf. "It's harmless enough," she said. "Curious makeup, though. I think it's . . . prehensile." She looked up at the branches. "You notice all the trees we can see are the same species."

The ground beneath my feet was soggy and I shifted my position, shuffling on the grass. I became aware at last of a sound which had been nudging my subconscious for some time. "There's water flowing under us," I remarked. I bent down and examined the grass, parting the close blades. The exposed soil glittered in the sunlight. Moisture was trickling across the plain from the slightly higher ground of the forest.

"There must be a spring in the forest," Gertrude surmised. "Fed by the mountains, I expect."

"Odd, that with all this water we don't see any streams," I said. Now that the sun had shifted, the whole plain seemed to sparkle as though dusted with frost. A small animal, similar to the one we had seen before, trotted busily across the plain toward us, its tiny feet kicking up spray.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As we watched, it paused about twenty yards away, looking up and beyond us at the trees. I followed its gaze.

One of the trees was bending; like a bow it arched down towards the animal, its five branches reaching like slender figures. The creature remained still, as though mesmerized, watching the tree, uttering no sound. The leaves at the extremity of the branches closed around the animal firmly. The tree lashed erect, a catapult, scattering loose bark and leaves. I was just able to make out the tiny form soaring in an arc above the treetops before it fell into the depths of the forest.

"Alec!" cried Gertrude in alarm. "Let's get out of here. These trees are dangerous."

I had, of course, already realized that, together with the fact that my gun was of little use in the circumstances. We moved away from the reach of the trees, back to the plain. Spreading a waterproof we sat down to observe. I was silent, annoyed at myself for not having turned the crisis to advantage; it was Gertrude who had given the order to retreat.

Above all, though, I was troubled by vague misgivings; a hidden terror at the strangeness of happenings. There was something uncanny about the way the little animal had allowed itself to be caught. It was unnatural, a death wish. . .

IT REMINDED me of an unfortunate period of my life in Weymouth. You don't mind if I digress for a moment, do you, Doctor? I know you psychiatrists enjoy nothing so much as uncovering childhood traumas and relating them to subsequent behavior.

In some ways Weymouth was superior to Leicester; it was bright and open and the sea was an attraction. I was at an age when I was getting interested in girls and, during the holiday season, with the town packed with tourists, there was plenty of scope. I formed a habit of picking up a girl in the evening on the seafront, taking her to the Albany, a large hotel at the eastern end of town, filling her with cheap drink and then enjoying a romantic tumble on the headland overlooking the bay. I used to experience trouble with my mother; she would be waiting up for me when I crept back in the small hours, her face a mask of recrimination. But by then I was sixteen and more able to deal with her moods.

On one of those nights, I drew a blank on the seafront but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nevertheless moved on to the Albany in the hope that I might find company there. An hour or so later I was wandering disconsolate on the headland, gloomily regarding the lights of Weymouth as they curved away to the dim bulk of Portland and thinking how brash and artificial they looked when I had no girl with me.

Sarah called my name. I had met her before in the town; my mother had warned me away from her, describing her in her archaic fashion as 'bad company.' I was disappointed to find that she was not alone; about five or six in her group sat on the grass, their legs dangling over the edge of the cliff. She informed me casually that they were going on a trip; would I care to join them? I didn't understand until I caught the flash of a hypodermic, and then it was too late; I couldn't very well back out.

I can't really describe what it was like, Doctor. I expect you know, you've read papers on the subject even if you haven't actually used the stuff yourself. They called it Flash; you know, like a new once-over household cleanser.

I slid backward down a tunnel of stars, watching them recede toward the ever-diminishing disc centered on Portland Bill. Soon that disappeared, and with it my last foothold on the world I knew. The stars fled by and I was standing, although unable as yet to see the ground. I was eight feet tall; I had a beard and was dressed in white robes which glowed in the twilight. The water was before me, rolling turquoise and black into the distance. I could see the lights of a small fishing boat sailing home. I made to walk on the water but one of my disciples restrained me, saying he needed no proof; Satan was testing me. So we turned away and walked towards the Inn and the Sinner stood before me. I looked around in sorrow and compassion; bloated shapes lay all around, drugged by the poison of his wares and breaking into dissonant song from time to time, beating their jugs on the tables.

I demanded that he turn them out, close his inn and follow me; but he laughed, his face evil. Hands were laid upon me and we were cast out of the inn to lie bleeding in the grass. I felt a great sorrow for the world and wished to make amends for Man's shortcomings. So I made love to a young girl from among my followers, in order that she might bear the fruit of goodness.

Prosaically, I came around with a blinding headache. I've told you the way it seemed at the time, Doctor; although it was a long while ago I can still remember that first trip clearly. There were sub-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sequent trips, of course, and later an unpleasant confrontation between Sarah's mother and my mother, each contending that her offspring had been led astray by the other.

But it was the sense of *alienness* on these trips which reminded me of the case in point. After a while you knew where you were and didn't try, for instance, to walk on water. But everything was nevertheless strange, different, with an underlying menace which I found incredibly exciting; it was you and your friends against the unknown.

Maybe that's why I began to warm towards Gertrude as we explored Zusam together. As we realized the hidden strangeness of the place it caused us to draw closer to each other in mutual protection. We didn't know what we were fighting, or if there was anything we needed to fight, but there were a host of little pointers which gave us to understand, slowly, that the planet was not what it seemed.

The first instance of this growing awareness came as we entered the scout on the day we saw the animal caught. Gertrude went through the airlock first and the hatch clanged to, leaving me standing alone on the platform. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming desolation as I regarded the cold steel wall with the hairline crack denoting the hatch. I wanted nothing so much as to see Gertrude again, maybe to assure myself that she was still there and that I was not alone on the planet.

At last I entered also and she was waiting immediately inside. We said nothing; we sat in our respective couches among the array of controls and regarded each other briefly. Then we pressed the reclining buttons and composed ourselves for sleep.

I told you, Doctor, she was older than I, and not what you would call an attractive woman.

DESPITE our initial fears we gradually came to the conclusion that the trees were harmless, as far as we were concerned. We observed them for some time; they rippled, shifting, whenever one of the small animals came within range. After a moment the animal would lie still while the trees became more animated until one of them would lean forward, pluck the animal from the ground and catapult it into the forest. But the trees never seized a moving animal, nor did they stir in our presence; maybe we were too large to be recognized as prey. But even trees can learn.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two days later we ventured deeper into the forest. We were not surprised to find ourselves holding hands as we walked; our relationship was rapidly growing closer. I don't think either of us thought of the future, we were becoming wrapped up in ourselves and the mystery of the planet Zusam.

We had caught a few of the animals and cooked them together with the fleshy leaves of the trees, and found the resultant stew very palatable. This was a good sign as it meant that future colonists would have a source of food readily available while they waited for their crops to come up. The animals were easy to trap; they lived in holes and Gertrude surmised that they burrowed their way through the soil, feeding on the lush grass roots and slugs as they went, rather like terrestrial moles. We set several wire snares at the entrances to the burrows and the animals readily gave themselves up, seeming almost to want to be caught—an extension of their attitude towards the trees.

We walked quietly through the forest and in my free hand I held the gun. The trees were all around us, unchanging. Occasionally we saw the small animals but no other species and no birds. Gertrude voiced my thoughts.

"There's not much variety here," she observed. "In three days we've seen four life forms, that's all. The grass, the slugs, the trees and the animals. At some time or other there must have been a thorough cleaning-up of the residue of evolution and these are the only survivors, if we can take this area as being representative of the whole planet."

She continued to theorize, but my attention was suddenly drawn away. I interrupted her.

"Listen."

Very faintly, just above the lower limit of audibility, I could hear a deep throbbing sound. So deep in fact, that it was difficult to tell whether I registered actual sound, or a ground vibration. I knelt down, drawing Gertrude with me, and put my ear to the wet soil.

It was there in the ground, a thudding like a heartbeat, regular and slow.

We stood and looked around. The trees were still, the forest quiet. Water trickled past our feet. We walked on, almost paddling now, towards the place where we thought we might find the source of the strange noise.

Soon we emerged into a large clearing and sudden sunshine. We

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had grown so used to the trees that we stared in astonishment at the sight of a huge clump of low plants with long, gray-green fronds. They had large brown holes about ten feet in diameter and resembled outsize sea anemones. The boles pulsed steadily while the fronds—almost tentacles—fanned the air.

Recovering, I walked over to one and kicked the bole experimentally. It felt resilient; the plant pulsed away and the fronds waved inquiringly in my direction.

"Careful," said Gertrude. "The chances are, there's some sort of acid on those cilia." I jerked my hand away, not before I discovered she was right. My skin stung mildly where the tentacle had brushed it; no worse than a nettle.

There were a number of the small animals scuttling under the plants and I observed with interest that the tentacles made no move in their direction. I mentioned this to Gertrude.

"I'd noticed that," she replied. "They must be after some other game; obviously these fronds are meant to trap things. Maybe there's some sort of large insect about, which we haven't seen yet."

"Or else they catch the animals that the trees throw," I suggested.

She bit her lip, looking annoyed that she hadn't thought of that herself. "Could be," she admitted.

There was a funny thing. I had scored over her. She was a strong woman. Decades ago she would have been the type to campaign for equal rights. Yet as we walked back through the forest she clung to my hand as though afraid I would leave her and wander off; after a while, she put her arm around me.

I've said before, Doctor, that I'm pretty successful with women, but that doesn't mean that I've always been able to figure them. Years ago in Weymouth, when I crept back to my mother after a particularly unpleasant trip which I swore would be my last (I had found that Flash was villainously addictive) instead of bawling me out, she put me to bed and watched over me all night, as if I were a sick child. I would wake and find her crooning.

That night on Zusam, Gertrude and I slept together under the scout in the open air and framed by the tall, stilt-like legs. Although we huddled close, the vague unease I had felt previously began to return. The tubes of the retros pointed down at me like guns.

I woke with Gertrude murmuring in my ear, "I love you, Alec."

"What?" I uttered a grunt of surprise and sat up. I found she was clutching my hand, or I hers; I'm not sure which.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What did I say?" Gertrude sat up too, rubbing her eyes with her free hand, her spectacles, which she slept in, pushed up on her brow. Somehow, she didn't look as unattractive as that might sound.

"You said you loved me," I answered ruthlessly.

"Oh . . . " She blushed. Imagine that, Doctor, a woman of forty blushing like a teenager. "Well," she said defensively, "I do. There's no point in denying it. I love you. I can't bear to think of this week coming to an end."

Suddenly we were clasped in each other's arms. Don't get me wrong, Doctor; somehow there was nothing . . . physical about it. I mean, no sex. It was different, sort of pure. I just wanted to hold her against me and whisper things to her. There was a tremendous feeling of togetherness—I know she felt exactly the same. It was almost as though. . . . don't laugh, for God's sake. It was almost as though we were one body, one soul.

It was wonderful: I can't describe the feeling of completeness, as though all my life I had been only half a man. All those episodes with the young strong girls of the Pioneers seemed sordid by comparison, shallow and animal. How we managed to cook breakfast that morning I'll never know; giggling helplessly like a couple of kids, never letting each other go, we performed mutual contortions to light the fire, heat up last night's stew and eat it, feeding each other out of the pot with the same spoon.

Then we wandered hand in hand across the grass toward the forest. We still had some sense of duty left; and as Gertrude said, if we made a good showing on this project they might team us up again for the next.

The trees appeared more friendly; they seemed to crowd in on us less, and the little animals scuttled tamely about our feet. We reached the grove of plants and stood for a while watching them beat like giant hearts, their tentacles waving as though in greeting. As we watched, there was a rustling in the trees. An animal had alighted in the branches, presumably tossed there by one of the outlying trees. The thick leaves fingered it for a moment as though gauging its weight, then gently lobbed it across the clearing into one of the anemones. The plant caught it, wrapped it in a net of tentacles and drew it down to the thick body.

It was not an unpleasant sight, Doctor; you've got to understand me. It seemed natural; in the order of things as they should be. The animal was not afraid; it gave its life willingly for the sustenance of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the great plant. While we were in the forest we were in love with the planet as well as each other, so nothing was terrible on Zusam.

Except, somehow, when we were back at our base, say at night, when we lay huddled together and had time to think. Then the misgivings would begin, at least as far as I was concerned.

Gertrude expounded her theory on the ecology of the planet, the following night as we lay on the grass. It was something to talk about; it kept the ghosts at bay.

"It's a beautifully compact full circle, Alec," she said. "Start with the grass. In the sunlight it builds up carbohydrates by photosynthesis, feeding the slugs which live among the roots. The slugs produce the protein to feed the little animals. Quite voluntarily, perhaps when they feel they are . . . ripe, for want of a better word, the animals surrender themselves to the trees. The trees throw them back to feed the big plants which are, in fact, semi-animal. The plants are situated above the water table fed by the mountains. They have a heart-like organ and, I should say, deep roots which reach down to the water. They pump it up, allowing it to flow downhill and across the plain, supplying the trees and the grass. That closes the circle." Smiling in the twilight, she held me close.

And I felt the terror seep back.

I had looked behind, once, as we left the forest that evening; I felt a curious sorrow, a sense of loss as we walked away. And as I looked, I saw the branches of the trees reach toward us, ever so slightly.

I wondered if they thought we were . . . ripening . . .

FOR two more days we lived in the open air, in the warm and pleasant climate of Zusam. As Gertrude said, the colonists would have to get used to it; it was a useful exercise on their behalf. And it was successful, too; we woke every morning feeling fresh and alert; although the grass on which we slept was damp, neither of us suffered from any stiffness.

We explored together, hand in hand or with our arms about each other; in our newly found love we could not bear to be apart for an instant. We soon came to the conclusion that we had seen all there was in this area of Zusam, having met no new forms of life or variants on the species we had already observed. In fact, all we needed to do for the next couple of days was to enjoy each other's company until it was time to go.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We made one expedition in the direction of the mountains but this fizzled out when the terrain grew rough and rocky.

I jumped to a boulder and turned to assist Gertrude. She leaped toward me so quickly that I overbalanced and we fell in a heap, hugging each other. "Hey, what's the idea?" I protested.

"You let go of me," she said. "When you climbed to that rock you let go of my hand. I felt lost." She giggled nervously, working her hands under my clothes as we lay, stroking my chest.

I was mildly alarmed at my own sensations. I didn't admit it at the time, but when for that brief instant we had been apart it was as though I was split in two, mentally and physically.

I pondered on this as we made our way back through the trees, arm in arm, Gertrude chattering happily, having already forgotten the experience.

"When we've finished our current tour of duty," she was saying, "why not let's the two of us join the colonists here?"

"Leave the Pioneers?" I exclaimed, aghast.

"Why not, Alec? We could make a good life here. We'll be just in time to join the first group to arrive. We could be very useful to them, with our experience."

She was regarding me pleadingly. She was serious. Damn it, I tried to think, she's a hell of a lot older. For me, there would be other women, but I think I was the first man she had ever known. I still had a molecule of common sense left, even with my arm around her.

"It's a wonderful idea," my lips said. And my body agreed, and my mind; and it was only that tiny lurking region of sanity in my brain which screamed that I was making a fool of myself. And it was so easy to shut the door on that region. . . .

Until we stepped out of the trees on to the plain. She turned and looked back at the forest.

The nearby trees reached toward us, fingers of desire stretching for an object of love.

Gertrude's face was ecstatic. "Not just yet," she whispered softly to the trees. "Give us time to get used to your way. And there will be more of us, too. Just wait a while."

Horrified, I broke loose from her and started to run. I think I screamed.

And fell to the ground within four strides. I lay, unable to move farther; it was as though we were tethered together.

And she was lying beside me on the wet grass, murmuring in my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ear, telling me that everything would be all right, there was nothing to be frightened of, how could I be frightened of love?

Somehow we got back to our camp under the scout and lay close. Her arms held me tight as I shuddered away my terror, and all the time she kept whispering to me, "Silly boy, silly boy, don't be afraid, I'll look after you, just keep close to me and you'll be safe, everything will be all right."

IT'S the feeling of being helpless, completely helpless, which I can't take, Doctor. If ever there were mitigating circumstances, these applied to my reasons for killing Gertrude Nash. Insane or not, I *had* to kill her. Believe me, there was no choice. And which one of us was insane, anyway? Or was it both of us?

Helpless in a world of unreal emotions. Unable to control events, unable fully to understand them. History repeats itself, which was what you wanted me to say, wasn't it, Doctor?

Weymouth again? If you say so. If it will give you any clue.

Laying off Flash, the withdrawal symptoms. Six weeks of sheer hell when the room about me was alive with ghosts and devils not always unseen. This was the drawback to the drug, the one thing which Sarah had omitted to tell me. The first trips are exciting, full of hidden dangers which it is infinitely thrilling to overcome. Then, as the body becomes accustomed to the drug, begins to demand it, the dangers become more real, the dragons more fiery, the Devil more evil. And it is vastly more difficult to win through to normalcy.

Mother always there, beside my bed whenever I open sane eyes; feeding me, bathing me and administering the jabs prescribed by the specialist; the jabs of some drug similar to Flash in effect, but not addictive. So I still take the trips, still face the perils day after day, still win through, each time more narrowly than the last. But in moments of lucidity I am told that I need the drug and the trip less frequently each week. Although time has long ago lost its meaning and I have only their word for it that I am being cured . . . Until one day I surfaced to find the specialist and my mother arguing beside the bed.

"Why did you do it?" he was saying.

Mother hestitated; I think she had been asked the same question several times, and now at last she answered. "Damn you, Doctor," she said quietly. She was crying. "And damn all you people with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your cars and your clubs and pubs and husbands and wives and friends. Have you any idea what it's like for someone like me, who's got no husband, no friends, nobody except my son, and he goes running after some pox-ridden little trollop with her brain in her pants?"

"Yes, yes," the specialist said impatiently. "Things haven't been easy for you, I know. But that hardly excuses you."

He went on at some length. I was hazy at the time but I gathered that my mother had been sticking me full of Flash, instead of the stuff the specialist supplied.

It seemed that she would rather risk my sanity and my life to keep me around her, then let me go out with the girls like any normal lad of my age. For six weeks she had kept me a virtual prisoner. Imagine that. I was near seventeen then, Doctor.

Anyway, I left the next day. The Doctor said a qualified nurse was coming, but it appeared that mother would still be there. I crawled out of bed during the morning, dressed quietly and crept off to the monorail station.

And on the planet Zusam under that blue sky with a woman beside me, holding me and murmuring words of love; when everything might have been perfect, still I was beset by the overpowering sensation of imprisonment.

I tried to explain to Gertrude. "We have to get out of here, now," I insisted, "before it's too late. You said yourself that the species here are totally interdependant, symbiotic—well, we're becoming part of them."

"I love you," she said softly. "And I love Zusam. I want to stay here forever with you, Alec. I don't want to go back to the mother ship."

She had admitted it at last. I was the first man she had known, and she was scared of losing me once we were off the planet and among other, younger girls. She knew that the mutual infatuation was temporary, induced by some unknown factor on Zusam, the danger of which she was not prepared to recognize.

"We die if we stay here," I said harshly. "We're already in big trouble. Look at the way we have to be together all the time. It's the first step towards being totally assimilated into this queer set-up here. You remember saying that the residues of evolution had been cleaned up; well, it's not surprising, with a self-contained system as powerful as this. Before long we'll walk over to the trees, and we'll *ask* them to take us. Because we'll *want* to be taken, because we'll

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

love the planet's ecology more than life itself, just like those little animals."

"The togetherness of Zusam," she murmured. "A truly communist world, where all of life works for the good of all, willingly. I think it's wonderful, Alec. I'd love to be a part of this. With you here, as well."

"You're crazy," I said roughly. "We'd live for a month or so, that's all. What sort of a future is that?"

And all the time we argued, we held close to each other.

"You're not selfish, Alec," she protested. I could tell she was close to tears. "Don't pretend that. You want to stay here just as much as I do. Can't you feel it inside you, that calling, the summoning together, the way even our hearts seem to beat in time with each other and the pump-plants?"

Well, yes, I could feel this, but I wanted to live. I was thirty years old and had a lot of life before me. She was forty, unmarried, had been unbearably lonely until she had arrived on the least lonely planet in the Universe.

"Come on," I said as gently as I could, "we're leaving." I stood, drawing her to her feet. I held her close for a moment before we made for the ladder; even in disagreement we seemed to be two halves of the same whole.

I was in a hurry; I admit that. I wanted to get away from the place before I changed my mind. So we began to scramble up the ladder, myself leading and Gertrude two rungs behind, clinging to my waist. Looking back on it, this might seem a curious method of climbing; but I assure you, Doctor, it was necessary. Now that the decision had been taken we needed the mutual support of physical contact more than ever. We had not let go of each other for days, apart from that brief episode by the trees. We *could* not.

And I had forgotten the one-man airlock. We stood on the platform, clinging to each other thirty feet above the ground, and looked at it. For a matter of two minutes while we entered the scout, we had to be apart. I remember looking over the plain; the grass was soft and green and the trees seemed to beckon. There was a mist over the distant mountains; rain was falling there and I thought of the pump-plants thumping, irrigating the soil. I thought of them with love, and I think I was crying.

So I opened the lock quickly and pushed Gertrude inside and slammed the door. Then I leaned back on the low rail and gave my-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

self up to the most unutterable despair I have even known. Separated from me by a mere thickness of metal was half my being; the sensation was unbearable and I suddenly flung myself at the hatch. I found myself beating at the hard, smooth surface, screaming words of desolation.

And the hatch opened and Gertrude was in my arms.

"I couldn't do it," she cried. "Alec, I couldn't do it. It's not the planet, you must believe me. I couldn't leave you, even for a moment!"

Some time later sanity returned. We stood holding hands on the platform. Gertrude's face was streaked with tears. I think she knew what was going to happen, even then.

"I'll try," I said. I squeezed into the airlock and began to close the door, seeing that face in the narrowing crack of daylight, holding her hand right up to the last moment when I snatched mine away, and the hatch clicked shut.

And as you've guessed, Doctor, I couldn't endure it either.

As the hatch swung open again she was there waiting for me, her fingers thrust through the widening gap.

"Hold my hand, my love!" she called, and I took her fingers, then her hand. I fell toward her and we swayed together on the platform, clutching at each other.

I was sobbing aloud as I kissed her on the cheek, forced her back-

Want a way out of whatever it is you're in? Then read—

IF

The Magazine of Alternatives

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ward and let go. She pitched over the low rail. She turned over once before she smashed to the ground below and lay still.

She didn't scream as she fell; I heard her say "Alec" quietly, once.

Comment:

A difficult case. The press will no doubt say that the real criminal is the drug, which created parallel realities in the defendant's mind. This phenomenon of simultaneous, concurrent schizophrenia is a common experience under the drug which is used medically for treating depressives. In retrospect, the patient unconsciously selects the less unpleasant of parallel experiences and remembers only that. The question of murder has not arisen before.

Again, the relationship between the defendant and his possessive mother was peculiar. I think that the more imaginative passages of his testimony are an interesting lead in that respect. When apprehended, he said, "For God's sake don't send anyone down there. I'll tell you everything. I had to kill her to get away."

There are no lack of witnesses to the crime itself. At 12.10 p.m. on September 23, 2086 over sixty people saw Alec Nash and his mother Gertrude struggling on the steps to Weymouth monorail station. They have given statements as to the subsequent efforts of the victim to prevent her son entering the monocar and the eventual desperate action of Alex Nash when he forced his mother against the railings of the station platform from which she fell to the street thirty feet below, breaking her neck and dying immediately. He then leaped into the monocar which was about to move off, and was apprehended at the junction at Dorchester while changing cars.

We know which reality Nash remembers, but which reality did he *experience* at the moment of the crime? This is the important point. In an effort to clarify this, I asked him exactly when the killing took place. He said without hesitation: "about September 23, 2086, Standard Calendar." I pressed him further as to the precise time, but he said he didn't know. "Zusam rotates faster than Earth," he said. "Our watches were useless." You have to hand it to him, he's consistent.

So consistent in fact, that it will be interesting to read the reports of the preliminary survey teams in Sector G, as I believe the Space people call the latest area.

Adam Wight
December 12, 2086.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE BOY ON THE STAIRS

Dale E. Randles, Jr.

She belonged to a vanished yesterday, he to a canceled tomorrow . . .

THE sea rolled up to the sofa on which she sat, and then it receded. The sounds of Debussy and the smells of the ocean filled the room. In a few minutes, she would go to bring John up here for his classes, but for now, she sat before the tele-wall and drank in its simulated sensations. Finally, as the composition drew to a close, she sighed and shut off the wall, withdrew the Debussy tape and replaced it lovingly in its niche alongside her other recorded treasures.

She wondered briefly what the boy might have become if she had not found him last year, huddled on the apartment stairs, the climbing of which had been her daily exercise. She now had nearly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

complete control of the child's upbringing; he arrived each morning for his classes, taking them over her Cent-Com console, and he stayed until after dinner.

The arrangement had been a satisfactory one for the child's parents, who had two older children to feed and to furnish telly-teach outlets for.

It was not a satisfactory arrangement for Barbara Sherman, however, and she was determined to end it that morning by asking for complete possession of the boy by adoption.

A FEW moments later, she left the apartment, reliving as she had many times before, that first meeting with John on the stairs. After taking him to her apartment, her first questions had been directed toward learning the boy's identity and where he lived. She had been surprised at the ease with which her queries were answered. There was no lisping or fumbling for words, nor was he shy, once his initial fear of this tall, somewhat awkward stranger had been overcome. The child was slight, and appeared to Barbara at first about three years old.

"John Felcher," the boy piped loudly in answer to her first question. And then, as if reading her earlier thoughts, he volunteered, "I'm almost five."

"That's marvelous," she replied, her early reserve completely evaporated beneath the warmth of the child's personality. "Where do you live?"

"Fourteenth floor, minus," he replied automatically, his attention caught by the autumn scene that was being depicted on the tele-wall.

"Clear down there? What were you doing on the stairway on the tenth floor, plus?" She hesitated. "You didn't walk all that way, did you?"

The boy shrugged his slender shoulders and continued studying the tele-wall. "He told me to take a walk."

"Who is 'he', John?" (she had always hated diminutives) "Who told you to 'take a walk'?"

"Father," the boy said quietly, then, pointing at the tele-wall, "What kind of show is that? Doesn't do much."

"No," she laughed, "I guess it doesn't. But then, it really isn't a show, John, it's a picture. We are supposed to pretend that the tele-wall is really a window and that we are in the country."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's a window?"

This unexpected question surprised her, but she did her best to explain to him the function of a window—a difficult task, since the child lived on a deep down floor of the giant apartment complex and had never been outside its halls. She momentarily wished that she had paid the extra amount for a room at the outside of the building.

"Look, John," she said finally, "Perhaps after we go down and I meet your parents, they'll let me take you out to the country in a rail car with lots of windows."

"Maybe," John said dubiously.

Something in the boy's voice made her wonder what the parents would be like. It would be fun for her to take this ragged little boy for a ride. But how would it be for his folks? Would they resent someone from the upper levels doing things for their child that they, themselves, could not afford to do?

She shook her head and thought, *Better not make up my mind one way or the other until I meet them. Who knows, maybe they'll be nice and understanding.*

With that thought, she accompanied her new friend out of the apartment.

They went down to the fourteenth floor, minus, where the corridors were not quite as clean and wide and well-lighted as they were above ground. The Felcher's apartment was clean, however, and reasonably well furnished, despite the terrible burden of a third, taxable child. The other two children, a boy and a girl, both between ten and twelve, were fairly well dressed, but it was obvious that John was the recipient of his older brother's hand-me-downs.

Mrs. Felcher greeted Barbara at the door with a surprised "Come in, please." She was a short, pinched woman of early middle age, blond (and gray) with light blue eyes. Unlike their mother, the two older children were tall and gangling, but like her they appeared almost bleached. John came reluctantly in behind Barbara, his nearly black hair and large brown eyes, his slight build and fine features contrasting with those of his siblings.

Barbara introduced herself and then explained where she had found little John.

Ignoring the younger boy, Mrs. Felcher sent John's sister and brother out of the room and asked Barbara to sit down on the somewhat faded sofa. John, not knowing where else to go, seated himself at the dining table in the corner.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm afraid my husband was a little too rough on the boy this morning. Sometimes I think you can hardly blame him, though. Johnny costs us so much money, and Lloyd's job pays so little (lucky as he is to have it). And, of course, the boy was not his fault, but mine, as I am reminded every time taxes are due."

The bitterness in the woman's voice made Barbara wince. "Don't you think you should ask John to leave the room?"

Mrs. Felcher gave her a startled look, saying, "He'll be better off if he learns the way things are while he's young."

Barbara did not say what was in her mind, but resolved to go ahead with her plan to ask the Felchers to let her take the boy out now and then.

For the time, however, she dropped the subject of Mrs. Felcher's youngest son, and the woman became more relaxed. Barbara was astonished to learn that she actually had a few things in common with the older woman. They both liked to read, for instance, in spite of the ready accessibility of digested information and entertainment via the Central Communications Network. Consequently they shared a level of education well above that of the average member of the world community.

Barbara had been talking with John's mother for two hours when she finally decided to bring up the matter which had been on her mind all afternoon.

"Mrs. Felcher, would it be all right if I came by next week and took John out to the country for a few hours?"

"Sure, any time. He mopes around the house most of the day anyway. Can't seem to get him out with the rest of the kids."

AFTER that, it was an easy step to having the boy spend days in her apartment with her. Soon John began to spend more time with Barbara than he did with his parents. Now, one year later, Barbara approached the Felchers' door, her speech firmly in mind.

She knocked somewhat loudly and was admitted by a smiling Mrs. Felcher—who no doubt expected as usual, to be entertained with light conversation before Barbara took her son upstairs.

"John," Barbara asked, "Would you please wait for me outside? I have to speak to your mother alone for a moment." The boy walked out. "Jean," she began before the woman could question her action, "for the past year, John has been spending most of his time with me. You seem to like this arrangement, and John seems toler-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ably happy, although at times I practically have to drag him down here at the end of the day."

"What are you . . . "

"Jean, you as much as admitted to me that your husband hates the boy. You yourself sometimes resent him because of the way Mr. Felcher uses him against you. And he costs you thousands of dollars a year.

"With that money, you could move out of the basement. All you need to do is turn the boy over to me. Permanently. Let me adopt him."

Mrs. Felcher hesitated. Then she smiled and said, "I've almost been hoping you'd ask me that. I've given it a lot of thought and I honestly think that Johnny would be better off living with you. If you knew how Lloyd treated that boy . . . Perhaps with John out of the apartment, Lloyd would settle down and become more of a father to the other children.

"There's only one problem, Barbara. Lloyd would have to sign the papers too, and there's no way to say how he'll react." She paused before she concluded. "Why don't you go down and put it to him? Maybe your honesty and directness will get through."

JOHN had questions for her when she came out to him in the hall, but she told him to wait until later. "I have an errand to run this morning. Afterward I'll try to tell you what we talked about."

As usual, they took the elevator to the tenth floor, plus, thus avoiding any toughs who might be lurking in the stairwell of the lower levels, then walked the rest of the way for the exercise.

Back in the apartment, Barbara slipped a well-worn tape cartridge into the console. The music helped her relax as she began preparing for her confrontation with Felcher.

John didn't interrupt her thoughts as, in her mind, she drifted back to one of their first days together.

"WHAT are those funny noises?" the boy had asked, after she had slipped one of her tapes into the slot in the console.

"That's music, John!" She had laughed, "That's music that I made with some other people a long time ago. Sit down here on the couch and listen."

But the boy had another question.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What kind of music is that? It doesn't sound like the stuff my sister plays."

"Her 'stuff' is probably moog music, John, machine-made music."

"I like your stuff a lot better than Sherry's."

"Would you like to see how it's made?"

"Sure," the boy exclaimed.

"Just a minute while I dig out my violin. I haven't played it in years." She went to the large closet near the front door and found an ancient black leather case behind some boxes on the top shelf.

She sat down on the couch next to the boy with the case on her lap. Then she extracted the golden-brown violin and tuned it. She resined the bow, placed the instrument beneath her chin and then, in an afterthought, handed it to the child.

John took it silently from her hands, caressing it as though he could sense the power that had been locked into wood and strings by its maker so many years ago. He handed it back to her and she once again placed it beneath her chin.

Groping and hesitant at first, she began to play. As the intensity of the piece grew, however, her powers grew with it, until both she and the music soared to the climax.

BARBARA'S thoughts returned abruptly to the present as the tape came to its end. She left John to take his first class while she hurriedly finished readying herself to face Felcher. She reminded the boy to make some lunch for himself if she did not return before noon, and hurried out.

She worried as she climbed aboard the shuttle-bus, having met Felcher only a few times and having had only a few polite words with him. What Jean had told her about him only made her worry more. She particularly remembered one bit of information:

"His parents were strict New-Puritans," Mrs. Felcher had said, "Their ideas made no real impression on him. At times though, he will rediscover a little of the faith and browbeat me with it. He was on a religion jag when he demanded that I go ahead and have John in spite of the hardship he knew it would cause."

Barbara was certain that he must have come to regret that decision by now. As she thought this, her hopes began to revive. She would be honest and direct, as Jean had suggested, and he would see her side of it.

The shuttle-bus took her to the government building where Lloyd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Felcher had a cubbyhole office. She waited in the lobby while Cent Com announced her.

He was a tall man, with black wavy hair and small dark eyes. He motioned her to sit and said, in a deep smooth voice, "Hello, Miss Sherman. What brings you here to my office?"

"Mr. Felcher," she began, "for the past year, your son John has been living with me during the day. He has taken classes in my apartment and we have gone on outings together. Further, he has expressed interest in learning to play a musical instrument. He is an extremely intelligent and sensitive child and, in the proper evironment, he will probably become a fine artist."

Mr. Felcher frowned at her final words, but said nothing, waiting for the main point of her speech.

Barbara saw that she had failed, but she plunged to her conclusion. "Mr. Felcher, I ask you to let me adopt John as my son."

Lloyd Felcher folded his large hands on the desk top and gazed sternly at Barbara. With a new and frightening resonance in his voice he said, "Miss Sherman, I'm sure you could give our Johnny a great many things that Jean and I are unable to give. I'm also certain, however, that if you had gone to my wife instead of to me, she would have told you the same thing that I am going to tell you.

"God gives each of us a certain load to carry through life. For some, this load is light." He cast her a meaningful glance. "For others it is heavy, full of many smaller burdens. John is *our* burden, Miss Sherman. It is not given to us to place our burdens into the hands of others.

"I'm sorry," he concluded when she did not move to leave, "but I have work to do. If you will excuse me?"

Barbara found her way to the street and, after donning her respirator, began walking along its side, letting her fingers bounce in and out of the declivities in the buildings. Her mind wandered aimlessly along tracks of memory which eventually led her to the day of her father's death, fifteen years earlier. She did not dwell on this event, however, but advanced a year to another unhappy occasion, intimately related to the first.

Somehow, as terrible as her father's death had been, coming so early in her life, it had been bearable as long as the orchestra survived that he had founded. But without his hands to direct it, survival had been brief.

The last concert had been held on what would have been his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fiftieth birthday had his plane not crashed into a Colorado mountain the year before. The audience that night had been small, as all had been recently, but when she was introduced for her solo, people rose and applauded for fifteen minutes. The salute had not been for her, she knew, but for her father.

The government had granted her an ample annuity, but that had not helped the loneliness. Since she was eighteen, she had been spared the humiliation of a guardian. Instead, she lived alone, occupying her time with reading, music and an occasional date with one of the sons of her father's friends. Gradually these outings had become fewer and fewer.

Laws had been passed during the latter twentieth century, taxing any children over two per family, but by the mid-twenty-first, these laws were largely superfluous. By that time, men had discovered that to live at all comfortably meant having few, if any, children.

Men were leary of women who wanted families. Many, to play safe, had themselves sterilized at the age of consent. Those who did not ran the risk (slim as it might be with ultra-sophisticated methods of birth control) of acquiring an unwanted dependent. And women like Barbara Sherman either went begging for husbands, or, out of pride, stayed single and became bitter.

Barbara had wanted a family desperately, from the time of her father's death. She remembered how happy they had been together after her mother left. Now she longed for someone to fill the void.

After she realized that none of the men she knew would (or, in most cases, could) give her children, she began searching for another way. She could have adopted a child, she knew, could even have been given a tax break for it. But she gave no more than a passing thought to this solution. She wanted above all to have a child with her father's genes, a child whom she could teach all that her father had known.

There were secret places where a woman could become pregnant if she wanted it badly enough, seksoteks in the cheaper amusement districts, places that catered to the perverted. As she turned thirty, Barbara began frequenting such places. She did not give up, even after four years of fruitless visits, until she met John. The dark, curious boy fulfilled the need that had sent her to the seksoteks.

BARBARA stopped. A red padded door beckoned. The atmo-sign above the entrance to the seksotek pulsed luridly. This was a new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kind of need for her, not the wish for procreation that she had felt at other times, but hunger for the oblivion of physical pleasure—for a moment's forgetfulness of her disappointment.

Inside, she was met by a well-muscled young man, in sprayon and codpiece, who led her to a small booth. She took a seat, and the attendant fitted a headpiece to her temples. After her exact needs had been analyzed, the same attendant showed her to a softly lighted room where a man waited.

BARBARA's disappointment, intense as it had been, was only temporary. As matters turned out, Felcher, enjoyed the extra money that came to him from boarding John at Barbara's. He did not, out of pride, try to stop further visits. Possibly he derived a kind of pleasure from teasing his far-upstairs neighbor with the boy.

John frequently asked to hear the old music tapes that Barbara was fond of. Her favorite composer was Debussy, but John was partial to Dvorak and to some popular twentieth-century composers.

One afternoon, months after Barbara's defeat, John was seated on her sofa, listening to the *New World Symphony*, while Barbara read a book. The second movement had just begun.

"That's a beautiful tune. What instrument is playing it?" John asked.

Looking up from the old volume, she said, "Run the tape back for me."

He did, and she responded, "That's from an old folk song called *Goin' Home*. The instrument's an oboe. Wait a minute. I'll show you a picture."

She punched a few buttons on the console and soon the tele-wall showed the object in question. She briefly explained how the ancient, double-reeded instrument was played.

John asked, "Is it very difficult?"

"I hate to discourage you, John, but it was probably the most difficult of all Western instruments. I'm not even sure that I can teach you. It's quite a step from the violin to the oboe."

"But that's what I want to play, Barbara—I like the sound of it. I've noticed it on quite a few of your tapes."

Remarkably, Barbara found an oboe in playable condition, one of two such instruments in a private collection. The owner was glad to sell when she told him her purpose.

John was soon practicing four hours a day. He mastered the funda-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mentals in a much shorter time than she would have thought possible. In a few months, they were playing simple duets, and John was talking about forming a musical group, if they could only find a few others who played.

BARBARA placed the music stand in position and swiveled one of the dining chairs to face it. John liked to practice a little before he began the government-required classes.

She looked at the clock. He was late. She frowned. He did not always arrive precisely at eight-thirty every morning; often Mr. Felcher liked to delay John until he left for work, just to worry her. She had a feeling, though, that this time was different. Felcher had been acting more strangely than usual the last few days. Perhaps she should call . . . . No, she would wait.

Resuming her seat, she inserted the tape that she always played when she wanted to relax. Once again, Debussy filled the room.

When the tape was finished, Barbara again looked at the clock. Ten-fifteen—John had missed his first class. She punched the buttons quickly and Jean Felcher's familiar narrow features showed on the tele-wall.

"Jean, why isn't John here for his classes?"

"I'm sorry, Barbara, he won't be up today. In fact, I'm afraid he won't be up ever again."

"Why?" Barbara asked, her voice unnaturally high, "What's wrong?"

"The State's taking him away this afternoon. Yesterday Lloyd lost his job."

"Oh, my God. Why didn't you tell me right away?"

"Miss Sherman," Mr. Felcher cut in, "the fact that I've lost my job is none of your affair."

"But losing John is my affair, Mr. Felcher."

"You seem to forget," he said coldly. "Johnny is our son."

Barbara hesitated. Then, a strange, triumphant smile came over her features. "And you seem to forget that, as of this afternoon, John will no longer be your son."

She switched off, and as she did so she laughed. Lloyd Felcher thought that he had taken John away from her. He was wrong. *On the contrary*, she thought, *he has just handed John to me as much as if he had signed adoption papers.*

When the parents of a taxable child can no longer afford to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

support him or pay the tax on him, the state places him up for adoption. *All I have to do now*, Barbara thought, *is go to the bureau and fill out the forms.*

With this in mind, she was out the door and down the elevator. She shook her head as she ran. How could she have been so blind? Before meeting John, she had thought that she could love no child but one of her own flesh. Now she knew she could love no child but John.

In fifteen minutes, she was inside a huge cavern marked "County Adoption Bureau." It was two hours before she stood before a bored clerk at a desk in a small office.

"Now, Miss Sherman, if you want to adopt a child, you must begin by filling out these forms."

Barbara brushed the indicated pile of papers aside. "Not just 'a child'," Mr. Pinker; a particular child, one who is being removed from his parents this afternoon."

"Oh," the clerk said quizzically, "then you are already on our waiting list?"

"What waiting list?"

The man smiled. "There is a list, but it's short. It only takes a year."

"A year!"

"Yes." The man laughed. "I'm afraid that if you are not already at the top of our waiting list, your adoption of the child you spoke of would be impossible. Even at his age, he'll go fast. He's worth a small fortune in tax savings to some lucky couple."

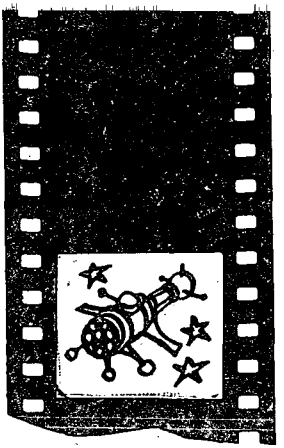
Mr. Pinker's laughter still sounded in her ears as she raced into her building. She did not know where they would go—they would have to decide on the run. But first she had to reach John before they took him away. Down the elevator. So slow! The hallway seemed longer somehow . . . . There it was, 1476—she pounded on the door.

"Well, what a pleasant surprise." Johnny's former father was smirking at her, she realized. "Too bad that you're too late to say goodbye to Johnny."

I will find him, she thought as she moved through the hall. *If it takes a hundred years* . . . But she knew with anguished accuracy that those hundred years were already behind her and behind John, too, back in a time when people had made their own music.

Lloyd Felcher had been right. She was too late—her whole life had been too late—even to say goodbye. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



EPIC

William Rotsler

He had survived the limbo of being yesterday's hero—but could he survive his own legend?

I

THEY kept telling me that having a movie made about you was the ultimate compliment. I kept feeling like a damn fool.

They started well off course by offering me money. Money is not one of my problems. I'm far from rich—but I can do what I want, pretty much. I found out years ago I can go just about any place and meet with a lot of hooplah and people who are eager to pick up the check.

I don't take advantage of them often, because I'm tired of posing for holos, making speeches and answering a lot of repetitive questions. Mostly I hang around the Cape, keeping in touch, except when the President wants me on some board or commission to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dress it up. Or when the PIO talks me into going somewhere and doing something I've done before.

So I just passed the request from Universal-Metro on to the secretary the FSA gives me and forgot them for a while. So they came at me from a different angle.

I received a call from Tom Schultz, the PIO at the Cape. He was very enthusiastic about the picture idea.

"It'll be a biggie, John; they're really going to spend some loot. Top people down the line. It's scheduled to premiere just before the next five-year appropriation plan is voted on. Big premiere, lots of politicians, stars, lots of tie-ins. It's *got* to make Congress think about what we're trying to do here."

I felt the tug of duty and I didn't much care for it. "So you think I should go ahead and let them? What do Riley and Raeburn say?"

"They're for it, provided you introduce them to Margo Masters."

"What does she have to do with it?"

"She's going to be in it. She's the biggest star Universal-Metro has."

"A sex symbol in the space program? Aw, come on, Tom. Are they going to put bug-eyed monsters on Callisto? A sex queen living in a gravity bottle on the surface of Jupiter?" I said a few more things, very basic, very obscene.

"Listen to me, John—they're putting a lot of money into this. I'm getting the feeling from up front that they want this project to go. And not just to goose the appropriations along, either. A lot of heavies are interested in this one. The only way they'll get some ego-boo will be if this film gets made."

"Who? Wells? Patten? General Fitch?"

"Fitch mainly. He's getting static from Senator DeVore."

"Dick DeVore's son? Is he trying to follow his father's footprints into the White House?"

"Well, President DeVore was responsible for the Jupiter probes and the first three manned missions."

"Stop sounding like a press agent, Tom. He saw the interest the people had in it and he climbed aboard. That vidcall when I docked at Station One was pure politics. I felt like a damned fool talking to him, knowing a couple of billion people were watching us."

"The DeVore name is still tied up tight to the space program and even though old DeVore isn't around the young Turk is making sure no one forgets."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What does he want to do, play his father?"

There was a pause in Tom's usually glib outpouring of wordage. "That's been mentioned, provided we can make the picture dignified enough."

"Oh, hell, Tom, I don't think I want anything to do with this. I'll look like an idiot. I'm no kid clawing after fame—let them make a film about Bergeron or Pavlat."

"They weren't the first, John. You were. You and Ballard. *Great Leap for Mankind* did the moon thing beautifully. *The War God Project* took care of the Mars landings. *Martin Stiles, Spaceman* was pretty much the definitive film on the Venus project. *Sun God* was big budget. *Voyage of the Spaceship America* was a great follow-up on the Mars trips. But it was a long time before we got past Mars and went all that way out to the big one, John. You know that better than anyone. That story hasn't been told. Oh, I know, the vidspecials, the books, the interviews. But the *whole story*, Johnny—they don't know the whole story. The Federal Space Administration would give every help, you know that. The Smithsonian would probably lend the *Zeus* to the company, for the exteriors, anyway. It would be first cabin all the way, Johnny."

I was silent for a while. I'd been living quietly.

"John? The President wants it, John. He told me himself, yesterday."

"More politics."

"So what? Everything is politics. You can't escape it. That slogan about onward into destiny got DeVore re-elected. Save Our Planet put Metcalf in the White House. This might just put DeVore *fils* back into the Oval Room, Johnny."

I sighed. "What did he promise you, Tom?"

"Enough. But that isn't the reason, John. The story *ought* to be told, you know that. And it couldn't come at a better time for the FSA. They'd be grateful, John. Rogers told me to tell you he'd like to see it done. So did Stan White and Shen Saroyan."

I heaved a giant rock up onto my shoulders. "Okay, Tom—okay. Tell them I'll do it."

"You won't regret this, Johnny."

I should have known enough right then to change my mind.

I DIDN'T believe Michael Tackett was real. He was too handsome, too big and too virile. To look at him you wouldn't think he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had a fault in the world. Even his voice was perfect; deep, sincere, strong. He could change in a flash from a gentle lover, strong but firm, to a raging terror, afraid of nothing. They showed me some of his films after I met him but nothing on the screen prepared me for the reality of him. After all, you expect movie heroes to be big and handsome. But to meet him in person was fantastic.

There was only one Michael Tackett. He was going to play me.

"Tom," I told Schultz on the vidphone, "he's six feet six! He'd never fit in any spaceship made. *I* was considered big and I'm five ten. I feel like a kid standing next to him."

"I'll talk to Steve Tolliver about this but I don't think anything can be done at this point. Everything has been announced and the contracts have been signed."

"Is he really supposed to look like me? I never looked that good even to my mother."

"Think of it this way, Johnny. It's not the outside they are showing, it's the inside. You're beautiful inside, John. Everyone says so."

"The old silvertongue, huh?"

"Not with you, old buddy. Did you see Tackett in *Guns for the Alamo*? Or the *Jim Bridger Story*? That's the way they want to play him. Remember him in *The First Spaceman*? He got an Oscar for *Joshua*, remember? He can play anything. This should be his greatest role."

"I give up. I'm six feet six and look like a Greek God. I didn't even use a spaceship to get to Jupiter. I jumped, holding Ballard in my arms."

"That's the ticket, Johnny. Just roll with it."

THEY didn't know me at the gate the first two times I came to the Universal-Metro lot but after that it was easy enough. After that I went to lunch with Mike Tackett a lot and when we didn't eat at the studio cafeteria we ate in any one of the lush restaurants in the immediate area.

I hadn't realized how much attention a superstar gets. My share of the bounce-back from him made me dizzy a time or two. I had thought I'd grown used to that sort of thing after the Jupiter trip. I had been drunk in every capital city of the world. Girls bribed their way into my hotel room and crawled naked into my bed. Most of the time the secret service men picked them up on the monitors, unless

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kinney was on duty. He figured heroes should get a little and he never discovered them until it was too late.

But going around with Mike Tackett was a tour and a half. Autographs, looks, insults, pleadings, amorous notes (from both sexes) and a headwaiter's instant attention were his daily lot. Strangers offered themselves, their wives, their daughters, their clients for any sort of misbehavior he cared to indulge in. Drunks wanted to fight. People tried to sell him things, have him endorse things, place bets, tout winners, read scripts or just smile at them.

Most of the time Mike acted as if none of it was really happening. He could sign an autograph or get rid of a pushy agent without breaking the thread of thought during a conversation.

I began to admire him. And hate him. And fear him.

And I watched him slowly become me.

It was uncanny. I knew he was watching me, studying me. Tolliver, the director, had explained that Tackett wanted to be as close to me as he could. He hadn't been able to study Joshua or Jim Bridger or Leonardo da Vinci but I was an authentic living hero and he wanted to be inside my skin.

He got *under* my skin, from time to time—but we drank together and got high together and pretty soon we understood each other better. And it was weird watching him turn into me. He changed the way he moved in subtle ways, became more precise, less flamboyant. He started using space slang.

I began to feel slightly cheated. He was me—but bigger, handsomer, sexier, younger and one hell of a lot more lifelike. Maybe he stole my soul.

ONE day Tolliver invited me into his office. He was about my age and had a solid reputation of movie-making behind him. *The First Spaceman, Sun God, The Mars People, Space Station One* and a couple of other space films, were among his credits.

"I wanted to fill you in on what was happening, John. The *Zeus* set is finished. They'll be ready for some publicity stills on that tomorrow. The Callisto set on Stage Seven will be ready next week. Did you see Houston Control over in Nine?"

"Yes, looks very authentic, except for no ceiling."

"Well, anything that doesn't look right—you tell me. We have Thompson as our final word on things, but he didn't move into the Jupiter project until it was well along. So you just speak up." Tolli-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ver turned to his massive desk and pressed a button. "Sylvia, send in Wrai Demmon, will you?"

"Have you met Wrai yet?" he asked me. I shook my head. Demmon was to play Ballard, I'd heard, but I wasn't familiar with him. He had made his name playing strong heavies opposite the big stars.

Demmon came in, making an entrance. He took both of Tolliver's hands in his and his deep memorable voice boomed out a greeting. Then his eyes swung to me. His face sobered, became almost respectful.

"John Grennell," he said, making the name sound as impressive as if he had said Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy.

"Mr. Demmon." I turned to look at Tolliver. "I mean no disrespect to this gentlemen, Steve, but Terry Ballard was nothing like Mr. Demmon."

"John—John, you don't understand. Mike Tackett is power on the screen. *Power*. We can't have anyone at all play Ballard. We need a heavy to play Ballard and there is no one better than Wrai Demmon."

"But Terry Ballard was a plain-faced little guy who looked more like a scoutmaster than—excuse me, Mr. Demmon—a pirate."

"Wait—we have to handle this very carefully. Very carefully. We can't alienate our audience. Terry Ballard was an American astronaut but he was also—well, how shall I put it? He was a coward. There is no other way to say it, John."

I looked at him. Demmon started to say something but I cut across him. "Terry Ballard was no coward, Mr. Tolliver. He made a mistake. It cost him his life."

"Everyone thinks that appraisal is most generous of you, of course—but we all feel the time is right to show that *men*, not machines, lead our space program."

"Where the hell did you get the screwy notion that Terry was a coward?"

"Well, uh, Senator DeVore opened some of his father's files to us—to Busby and Ellington, the writers—well, you know, we had to put some drama into it."

"There's no big drama in sending two men and a ship to the moons of Jupiter?"

"Not in the usual terms. If Ballard hadn't behaved as he did I'm sure history would see him as a brave astronaut giving his life in the course of duty. But we have a base on Callisto now. On Amalthea

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Ganymede, too. Jupiter isn't the big thing it was. The Saturn probes have shown us more. We'll have the Outsider back from Pluto orbit by the time this picture is in the theaters. We've moved on, John. To make people really interested in this we have to flesh it out a little. After all, most of the trip shows only the two of you in one ship—hardly any EVA. Then two walks on Callisto and the swing around the big one before heading home. That's not really a lot of action, you know, not in cinematic terms."

"Then I better tell you all about it. I didn't think anyone would believe me before. But Ballard didn't die like I said. We ran into these green Jovian girls, see? Built out to here. Live in bubble domes. They moved out when the base was put in but—"

"John, Please try to understand—if we don't make it *interesting* we don't have a picture."

"On the way past Mars I met this Martian princess, put in secret orbit a hundred thousand years ago by the high priests of the God Ares. I kissed her and she awoke. I'm keeping her in a bungalow below Sunset. She's light blue—but we tell everyone that's just because she's cold."

"Colonel Grennell—" Wrai Demmon's face was serious—"look at it this way. I'd like to portray Terry Ballard the best way I know how. You could help me do this. You could watch me and give me hints about the little things, the sort of thing you get to know by living with a guy in a tin can for eight months."

"Yes, I can help you, Mr. Demmon." I was rewarded with a smile. "You could lose five inches, forty pounds and capped teeth. You could look scared without changing expression. You could save my life and get called a coward."

I stood up and walked out.

II

A MOTION picture studio is a strange land, of itself and by itself. The past, present and future exist all at the same time. Everything is larger than life, more forceful, faster, more beautiful. A few days at the studio and I'd hardly pay attention to women that would have set me howling a year before.

But as studios provide a sort of never-never land where everything is possible they seem to make nothing possible. The guns have blanks, the stone walls are plaster, the sex synthetic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With Mike Tackett I had seen what it was like to be at the focal point of sex and lust and power. At the studio I could see the sham, the real tinsel beneath the false tinsel, the scrabblings for fame and power. The incident with Tolliver and Demmon left me helpless. I could do nothing.

I drifted. I still saw Mike. I stood like a fool with a group of Congressmen before the *Zeus* mockup. I went to a Universal-Metro premiere with a starlet named Zambra Farlowe. She had plastic breasts. I got drunk with a cameraman sitting in a western bar set and was seen by a tour of schoolteachers. The cameraman was fired and I had my wrist slapped.

General Fitch flew in from Houston with a portfolio of photographs from the newest Saturn probes, a big smile for me and the news that Senator DeVore was coming out on a fund-raising tour for his party and would like me to be there if I could.

"Oh, and could you bring Mike Tackett, too? And that actress that's going to be in the film, what's her name?"

"Margo Masters."

"Yes, could you get her?"

"I don't know her, General."

"The studio will fix it if you ask them, John. You have a lot of juice here, you know."

"I do?" Sure I do.

"Try, will you? The Senator will appreciate it."

"Sure. Why not?"

SENATOR DeVore was thirty-five going on Immortality. There was a drive in the man but I couldn't tell if it was ego, a lust for power or what the public saw: the tough, dedicated young man, son of a great President, who carried the banners of space, ecology and lower taxes.

"Colonel Grennell."

His handshake was firm, manly. Why is it you automatically distrust a politician? The more normal and honest he seems the more you suspect him. Where is the flaw? Where is the self-revelatory statement?

"Senator."

There were flashes as the photographers did their job. The Senator put an arm around me. The other was around Mike Tackett,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who was for once not quite the center of attention. A man with a good chance at being President of the United States has a certain reality in the presence of the basic unreality of motion picture actors.

But there is one thing beyond reality. It's a dream.

Dreams have power. Dreams topple despots and empires. Dreams also build despots and empires. Dreams can be women. In fact, they frequently are. In the lives of millions around the world one of the dreams was called Margo Masters.

There was a fuss at the door to the hall. I heard the words before I saw their cause: "Margo Masters! It's Margo Masters—"

Even Mike Tackett was affected. I glanced at the Senator, noted his coolness, his professionalism. But he was a man.

She came through the crowd like a queen. America has more queens than England ever had and one of the best was Margo Masters.

She went directly to the Senator and I could see the Senator thinking: *I know it's phony—but if she means only one-hundreth of how she looks at a man . . .*

I was her next target—right after the Senator. She put her face up for a kiss and I felt foolish as hell, pecking away in the direction of her ear. And I was startled when she said into my ear, "I want to talk to you."

She turned to Mike with a big flurry, then to several Congressmen wearing silly smiles, then to Steve Tolliver for a quick hug. She disappeared into the throng of big names, dispensing kisses and hugs like coins from a royal carriage.

What about? I was asking myself.

I found out somewhere around two in the morning in a hotel room five floors up from the ballroom where the benefit had been held. Miraculously there were only the two of us.

"I understand you object to my playing Melinda," she said.

She was in casual, immaculate white, with just enough bosom showing to be fashionable.

"It's nothing personal, Miss Masters. You are—an excellent actress."

She smiled. "What you're saying is that I play myself and this *self* is not that of Melinda Deckinger."

"She was born in a small town in Oregon, Miss Masters—"

"Margo, please—John."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She wasn't you. Not even with a different hair color, a different accent, a different—everything."

"I can act, John. I don't know if my Oscar means anything or not, considering the way some of them have been awarded—but I *can* act. I want to be the best Melinda I can."

I walked to the window and looked out. The lights of Wilshire Boulevard slithered through the cement canyons toward the immense downtown complex.

"And if the character of Melinda Deckinger gets in the way of the image of Margo Masters?"

She was silent for a time. Then she said, "Did you ever fall out of love with her?"

I waited a moment before I said, "No."

That Melinda and that John were a long time ago.

"Look at me, John Grennell." I looked at her over my shoulder, as if my back were a defense against her beauty. "Could you love me?"

"No, I'm sorry."

She looked faintly astonished, then smiled. "Too much image?"

"Maybe. You're public property, Miss Masters. You can't belong to one man. Not any more. Not ever. You wouldn't want it that way and the world wouldn't let it be that way. Your husbands were surrogates for all the sweaty men who wanted to ball you."

"Why do you have to have me for yourself? Can't you love me—just for me?"

I laughed and turned to face her.

"What has this to do with playing a part in a movie? Hell, lady, if you want to tell your grandchildren you slept with a check list of America's greats, I'd be more than happy to oblige."

Her great violet eyes slitted. For an instant she was real. Not a tawny pampered cat but jungle-bred quickness. And for that instant I loved her.

"John Philip Grennell, you listen to me. I've bedded with a hundred men to get where I am. Pigs and saints, Gods and animals. All the time I've hated it for what it did to me. Hated the beauty. Hated the effect on men. Here and there I thought I found a man who was right, even glorious. But each time it fell apart. The moment I stopped generating the image, the men left. Oh, maybe they didn't physically leave for a while—but they left. I was a little girl when you touched down on Callisto. You were the biggest thing ever to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me. Man had broken out beyond Mars. Maybe we'd yet go to the stars! You were a symbol, John Grennell. You were fast, tough and smart. You were right up there with Neal Armstrong and Einstein—"

"Hey, lady, that's crazy! I was just part of a team. I was the tip of a spear thrown into space by a hundred thousand men."

"You were that tip and you didn't break. You're still the symbol, John. I don't care how you cut it."

"But what does this have to do with Melinda? You don't look like her, you don't act like her."

"Grant me enough talent to project the *effect* of her."

"The image?"

"If you will. Melinda was beautiful. It is the effect that counts. No one can look exactly like another. But a good imitator can generate the effect of the person. That's what I want to do."

"So why make a big thing out of it? You have the contract."

"I have the contract with the studio. I don't have one with you. I want your approval."

I looked at her narrowly. I felt she was telling the truth, whatever her reason.

"Okay—Melinda had guts. She had beauty. She was intelligent. She was loyal. I don't know about the loyalty—but you have the other attributes."

Margo grinned at me. "Was she good in bed?"

Suddenly a weight lifted from me. I grinned back.

"I'll tell you in the morning."

ALL that was nice, of course. I didn't mind the least becoming another mounted head on Margo Masters' trophy room. But it didn't change the picture much.

I was being played by the world's most magnetic male star. My girl in the film was the Sex Queen of the Universe, a part well suited to her. Ballard was being made into Mr. Evil. The Zeus was twice as big as science and the FSA intended. Callisto's surface was a lot prettier. The telemetry monitors spoke more dramatically than I could believe. The FSA secretaries that U-M hired were far prettier than real life.

And the President of the United States was being played by his son, a bit of casting that sent the company publicists into orbit with joy and the public into energetic apathy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I complained to Tolliver so many times I gave up. I gave two interviews to the foreign press and had the studio on my back for two weeks. I said to hell with it and went swimming at Puerto Vallarta. My companions on that trip were (1) a young actress with the most expressive bust and hips in Hollywood and (2) her press agent.

The press agent got me back to the studio. His release to the effect that I was about to marry Simone deFrance sent me there at Mach IV.

I was in time to be invited to join the gang on Station One, where the exteriors of the *Zeus* and station shots were to be made. I hadn't been up for two years, almost three. I jumped at the chance.

Besides, Margo had asked me if sex was any different in free fall.

I told her I'd never tried it. In real life Melinda had never made it to space. Margo told me she'd like my cooperation in a space first.

"It's only right, two big stars like us," she said.

"I hate to disappoint you but it's been done by the Duke University research team—if not by the FSA girls."

"Foolish thoughts, Colonel John. It hasn't been done until it's been done by Margo Masters."

"I told you I was willing. Will you spell my name right in your autobiography?"

"If you promise to spell mine right in yours."

"Done, wench."

"The Cape on Tuesday, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. If there is anything I like it's a dedicated researcher with a heart of gold."

"I like you, Colonel John."

"And I like you, Sex Symbol of Our Time."

More than I care to think about, said my head.

THEY had sent me up in the first shuttle and when Margo arrived I met her, saying, "We have to stop meeting like this. Universal Metro is getting suspicious."

She laughed and looked around. "I did a film in this place once—that is, a mockup of this. It looks the same but it doesn't look the same." She looked at me again. "You must have a lot of pull to get them to let us shoot here."

"I'd have no power at all if FSA didn't want the film. I'm a has-been. They trot me out when they want to boost a rally or add a little push to a senator's race."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Cynic."

"Realist. Notice anything?"

She looked around. "No, why?"

"Gravity."

"So?"

"So no sex floating in space. The Station turns. Centrifugal force gives us about a half gee." Her face fell in mock tragedy. "You knew," I said accusingly.

"I know there is a central core, a passage up the length of the station, that's null-gravity."

"It's also Main Street. You want to have it spread all over the world you make love in public places?"

She grinned. "They think I do anyway. They *want* me to. I do all the things they want to do and can't—or won't." She patted my cheek. "But you can't. Authentic heroes are not figures of lust and fun. We'll just have to use a tug."

I laughed aloud, getting a fast look from Mike Tackett, who was coming through the airlock. "You, my little wanton, have been doing your homework. I was going to surprise you with it."

I took her along to the tiny cabins to which we had been assigned. She made a face.

"In *Space Station One* I had something big enough to make love to Ron Caughran in. Damn penny-pinching Government, anyway."

"Come on. Let me show you the place. It's dripping with drama, tradition and cosmic kharma."

"Yes, sir, Colonel John, sir. Which way is the tug lock?"

"Later, wench, later. That damn flack is going to want pictures all around before the shuttle goes back."

"Later?" she whispered, like a conspiratorial schoolgirl.

"Don't you read the Sunday fax sheets? We here at Station One are incapable of a serious sexual thought. We are dedicated, clear-eyed, firm of jaw—"

"I smuggled aboard an unserious sexual thought."

"So did I. We'll have to get them together and see if they take to each other."

She laughed and trotted off down the curving corridor. I followed her.

IT TOOK two days to get Stumpy to give us permission to take out a tug. I had to pull a little mythical rank on him. Not the eagles I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wore—he, too, had a set. But that elusive thing called fame. I was John Grennell, not just a visiting bird Colonel. And my passenger was none other than Margo.

She stood smiling and looking about eighteen. She had nothing on under the thermojumper. I knew because I had helped her dress. Stumpy melted.

We got Number Four and a checkout from a young lieutenant who couldn't keep his eyes on the panel. Margo and I were somewhat unsuccessful in hiding our grins as we decanted from the lock.

Rank hath its privileges, son, I told the lieutenant silently as we drifted away from the bulk of the station.

Margo was all eyes. Seeing space for the first time is a big thrill if you look through the port of a big shuttle or a true spacer. It's damned impressive through one of the station's large viewports. And it's more impressive still from the smaller but somehow more personal ports of a tug. I found space all fresh and new myself through Margo's eyes.

We spent two hours as if they were five minutes, just looking around, a couple of miles away from Station One. I pointed out the *Herms* in docking orbit and the tugs nudging the Sahara shuttle. She had a hard time believing that one tiny dot was the massive Station Four.

We had a good view of the Russian station when the sun came around and lit it up against the blackness. I spotted a fragment of something floating nearby and jockeyed us closer, then yanked it in with mag grapples. I peered at it, leaning out into the bubble.

"It looks like a piece from an old Atlas. Maybe one of the late Apollo flights. I guess they missed it when they did the big sky cleanup ten years back."

"Can I have it?"

I laughed.

"I suppose so. Weighs thirty-forty pounds, though. You could never wear it as jewelry."

"I'll have it cut up and polished and give pieces to friends for Christmas. Hey"—her face lit up—"I almost forgot!" She pressed herself against me. "Didn't we have some nefarious plan before we got carried away by the wonders of the universe?"

I laughed and began unzipping her jumper.

We came back bruised but happy. The equal and opposite reaction works, all right.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

BY THE next day the U-M crew was up, although it was only a skeletal group. Even the unions had to bow to payloads lifted to stations and did not resort to featherbedding. The balance of the crew loafed, drinking in Cape Kennedy bars and impressing the locals.

Steve Tolliver seemed to live in a tug that had been worked over to accommodate the big cameras and Owen McDaniels, his director of photography. They flitted about, getting space shots of the Station and the *Zeus* mockup floating next to it. Then there was a series of intricate shots to provide background for closeups that would be made later in the studio.

While Steve and Owen were outside the sound crew was all over the inside, collecting the sounds of the station from the tiniest whirs to the big woofing gasps of the main locks.

I asked the head sound man where he was going to get his meteor-flying-through-space noises and his roar-of-*Zeus*-leaving-for-destiny sounds. He looked at me wearily, smiled and said, "The same place I get the hum of ether and the music of the spheres, Colonel."

Steve and Owen did a beautiful shot pulling back from a port where the tearful-but-grave Margo-Melinda watched us leave for my appointment with Fate.

"I don't suppose it matters," I said, "but Melinda was in California when we left."

Steve put his hand on my shoulder. "I know we're taking liberties—but Melinda would have been here if she could have been—right?" I nodded. Steve spread his hands in an expressive gesture.

I think that was the nudge. Right then I started thinking another way. His casual rewrite of history annoyed me. It disturbed my what-the-hell-what-can-I-do-against-this-monolithic-machine attitude.

So I started to do something.

STEVE thought it would look better if they put Mike Tackett into a suit and had him personally drift over from the Station to the *Zeus*, right up to the big stereo lens of the camers.

He missed.

They caught him with a tug, of course, and he thought it was a pretty funny joke. I never thought floating on nothing and heading out was exactly a knee-slapper but maybe they make actors tougher.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I told them to use one of the experienced men from the Station and put enough steel into my voice to make them listen.

The PR man from U-M was in constant touch with the PR man back at the Cape and they soft-pedaled the switch and played up Tackett's miss. They soft-pedaled my grumbling and gave out polite little press releases about the continued cooperation of the Great John Grennell.

The capper came when a young major, his eyes on Margo and his heart locked to his future in the space program, kiddingly asked me, "Well, Colonel, what have you done lately?"

He was joking, of course. Just barely. But he struck home. What *had* I been doing lately? The one big thing in my life that I had done was being corrupted. This would undoubtedly be the way I, and Ballard, and the whole mission, would be remembered.

And it was all wrong. With a very great deal of talk, persuasion, muscle and rank I had gotten them to change Ballard's role from *coward* to *a moment of human weakness* but it still wasn't right. And they knew it wasn't right. But they were going to do it that way, anyway, because it was dramatic.

So what *had* I been doing?

Ladies' club meetings. A polished Exhibit A at Congressional hearings. A sure-fire hit at the Lions Club. Window dressing for a Presidential visit.

I'd done one good thing in my life and from then on all had been downhill. Ballard and I had kicked man out beyond the Inner Planets and had started the space program going again at a time when the money had been drying up. Our success had primed the pump and all those things they were finding out there were paying off handsomely. The outer four moons of Jupiter were all moving retrograde and at least three were certified extra-solar and chock full of geological wonders, including two new elements.

But what had I done lately?

Suddenly I had the feeling I was waiting. I didn't know for what. But something was going to happen. I had a feeling.

"WHAT'S that?" Margo asked, pointing out a viewport. I excused myself from a conversation with a laser lieutenant and went to her side. She was as excited as a schoolgirl.

"What?" I asked.

"That big globe with all the things sticking out of it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My heart began to pump faster and I found it harder to breathe. "That's the *Jefferson*. When the *Outsider* gets back from Pluto and they read the tapes someone will go out in that."

"Suspended animation, right?"

I nodded, my eyes on the most beautiful ship in the system. "You've been doing your homework."

"There's not much to read up here but all those science things."

"I thought making movies was glamorous and exciting. You're ruining my illusions."

That globe was going to Pluto. I wanted to go.

"It's going to take years, isn't it?"

"Yes. Pluto is nearly four billion miles out. Suspended animation is the only way."

I wanted to go but I was too old. And new heroes, not retreads, were needed. Two or three eager young ones were in training for every post open on every mission on the books.

I still wanted to go.

I wanted to go to the stars. I didn't want to turn off my mind every night in Margo's cabin. I was tired arguing with Tolliver. I was beginning to hate Ballard for not having come back alive.

I wanted to go to the stars.

Not just cold, distant Pluto—but Alpha Centauri.

The Big Step.

Next to the moon landing—the *first* moon landing—the next important step was to the nearest star. Mars, Venus, the moons of Jupiter, even the projected Saturn trip, even Pluto—all these were interim adventures. The Big Step was the one that counted. The stars.

I felt like a kid with his first science-fiction magazine. Lying in the midnight grass looking at the summer stars, swearing, *Some day, some day* . . . Looking through a viewport inches from the stars, a display case of firejewels, God's nightlights.

I hurt, wanting to go and not being able to go.

But I looked at the *Jefferson* and suddenly I had stopped waiting.

I CHECKED with the Station control and found that the parking orbit they were using to put the finishing touches to the *Jefferson* would bring the ship close to us—then we would slowly drift apart, each of us a bead on an invisible circular wire. But for a few days we would be close.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I took the opportunity to deadhead on a supply shuttle from the Station to the *Jefferson*, using my fame blatantly to hitch over.

The ship was a lot bigger than the *Zeus* but the control system was basically the Mark III updated and improved to the Mark IX. Any time now they'd scrap the designation and take a new ident scheme—but while this one was the great-grandson of the system in the *Zeus* it was still recognizable to me.

I may have been doing the creamed-chicken-and-peas circuit for a while but my years of hanging around the Cape were about to pay off. I was no stranger to the Mark IX controls for official policy toward a "spokesman" such as me was to keep me informed of what was happening.

I pressured a harassed light colonel I knew slightly to pressure the civilian in charge into giving me the two-dollar tour. I kept my eyes and ears on full alert. Once again I used my fame as a tool, keeping the civilian long past "tour time" answering my questions.

I "missed" the return shuttle and had to wait for the next one, thirty hours later. It gave me a chance to jolly a major into letting me sit in the control seat and do a run-through, letting the major have the honor of copiloting and instructing the Great John Grennell.

I stole Operations and Procedure Manuals.

I was about to become the first spaceship thief in history.

I liked the feeling. I was doing something, even if it was illegal, immoral and highly nonfattening. If I failed I was disgraced and in deep trouble. If I succeeded I could get killed.

I could hardly wait.

Oh, I didn't think they'd really put me in fail if they intercepted me. They'd ground me and slap my wrist and some PR would let it out that I had been stoned and some of the vidtabs would snigger and maybe jeer. Unless I hurt someone or smashed up the ship I'd simply get a lot of static. But I'd never make it out in space again. And not getting out in space again would kill me.

And I guess the laughter would kill me. The comedians in the media would make jokes and my old buddies would kid me and privately think I was over the hill.

If I succeeded they'd all be dead when I got back. And that wouldn't be much fun, either.

The first chance I had after returning to Station One I made love to Margo with a zest and enthusiasm that surprised her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What's gotten into you, Colonel, honey?"

"You are the Golden Princess of Sagittarii IV. You are the Sex Goddess of the Sexopods Empire and I have conquered you. You are Conan's Number One Mistress and Captain Future's illegitimate daughter. You are Flame and Fire, Ice and Diamonds!"

"Colonel!"

"I have rescued you from the Space Pirates of Cygni Zillion and am about to claim my reward."

"Again?"

"Again."

"Well, bless my stars!"

IT WASN'T easy, of course, but they weren't expecting it. They had figuratively left the keys in a car parked in a rough neighborhood.

I knew Margo wouldn't go—but I had to ask.

"Are you crazy? You *mean* it? But you'll be *old* when you come back!"

"No, I won't. You'll be old if you don't go. Probably dead and forgotten. I'll only be a few years older. I'll be twenty-nine years in suspended animation. I worked it out on the computer. Two, three months there—longer if there's intelligent life and they don't zap me at first look. Twenty-nine years back. Sixty years from now—if I come back—I'll have made the Next Step. Come with me."

"You're crazy. Stark, staring mad. Stealing a spaceship? Who wants to go to the stars anyway?"

"I do."

"I'm a star. Come to me, Colonel, honey."

"You don't glow in the dark."

Suddenly she broke into laughter. "If you are not twisting me around this will be the biggest publicity smash in history!"

"If I can do it, I'm going. I take it you are not coming?"

She smiled at me. "Colonel Bob, me darlin' boy, I appreciate the offer. I really do. I couldn't care less about the stars but I appreciate that you do. Starman, starman—the first starman." She sighed and hugged me close, her famous breasts flattening against my chest. "Going there and coming back would be the biggest publicity smash of the century, but it would be in the next century and that wouldn't do me any good at all."

"But you'd only be a few subjective months older."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Starman, honey, you just don't understand about women and ages. I know what I am here and now. I'm a star. I'm known and wanted and rich. Sixty years from now—if we come back—there might be a new fashion for stars, human stars. I might be out of a job and an image. I don't want to take that chance." She smiled again. "Call me chicken, chicken colonel."

I hesitated and started to speak. She put her fingers on my lips.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll keep your secret."

I kissed her but she broke free. "I'll swear PR to secrecy so we can break it the soonest, okay?"

"Nothing doing. You keep that beautiful mouth shut until I'm off and running. Not even to the PR people. If it came out you'd be an accessory before the fact."

"But what about you sixty years from now?"

"I'll be dead—or a hero. And today would have happened two generations back. Who will care? But I'll have done it. Or died. Or be out there."

She pulled me close and whispered in my ear. "You nut. Name a planet after me."

"I'll spell your name right, ne'er fear, damsel."

"Now take off that jumper and come in here with me. You are going to need a lot of loving to carry you for sixty years, Colonel, honey."

"Yes, ma'am, movie star lady."

SO I stole a spaceship.

It was easier than I thought. Margo invited everyone to a party paid for by Universal-Metro and everyone but a three-man crew zipped across. I took out a tug after convincing control I was making some special shots for the film company.

The *Jefferson* was ready to go. I'd checked. They had planned a short hop out to Callisto Station as a shakedown. Two men in suspension, two "life" plus supplies plus a shipment of assorted provisions for the Callisto personnel. It was the best chance I'd ever have and the only one. There was enough in the Callisto shipment to keep me going for as long as I needed. The newest converter had been installed, giving me maximum range and speed.

The entire suspension system was at optimum. The solar batteries would supplement the reactor. And there was only a three-man crew.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There was only one gun on Space Station One and I had it. I pointed the Colt .45 Auto at the three men. One glowered, one looked confused and one broke into laughter.

"Colonel, when I'm old and gray I want to see you return. I wish I had your guts."

"Thank you and keep moving. The tug will take you back."

The young technician sobered and stuck out his hand in a gesture of farewell. I shook my head. "No, thanks son. You might have a touch of hero in you and I don't care to shoot."

"Yes, it might leak too much air out of this ball of tin." He looked at the other two. "Come on, you goops, let the Colonel have the ball."

They left and I was secure. I had gaffed the radio so they could receive but not send, so no alarm would be sent until they were back. By that time I would be on my way. I dogged down the airlock, wedged the gun behind a pipe and headed for the control deck.

I pulled the heavy cassette out of my jumper as I hit the computer deck and stuck it in the slot. I'd used the Station computer to plot the entire trip out. All I needed to do was start it up, move out of orbit, then punch it in and climb into the tank.

I kind of wanted to take a look at the outer planets as I went by but I didn't want to use up my supplies on the home system. I had better uses for those precious goodies.

I broke orbit within ten minutes and ignored the radio, which had exploded into vociferous monologues. Houston and the Cape joined in.

Then I heard Margo. For her I stopped and listened.

"Colonel John? This is Margo Masters. I want you to know that your dastardly deed has been recorded for posterity. Tolliver had the cameras on you all the way, you terrible thief, you!"

The laughter bubbled up in me. Margo, you—you *star* you! What a finish for the big film! I could see the insert now. Mike Tackett, slightly grayed, steely-eyed at the console of a giant starship. Heading out. Alone. The first starman.

I punched in and heard them all stop, waiting to hear the first words of the first space pirate.

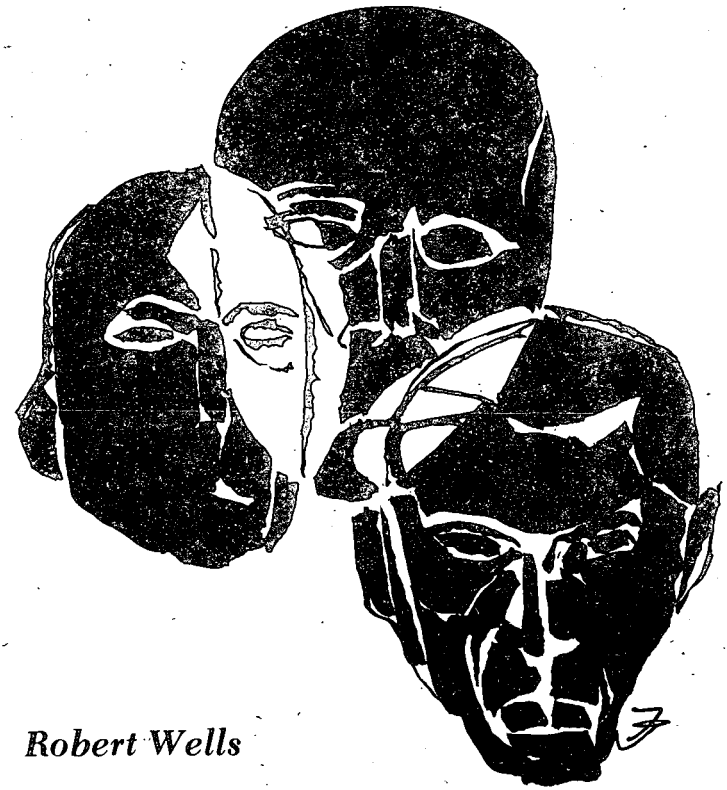
"You're welcome, Margo," I said.

I looked out through the viewport. I was going off into the sunset.

But it was a different sun. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE SWITCHER



Robert Wells

Tired of the same old psyche?
Then dare to look into the eyes
of the Switcher . . . and s-w-i-s-h!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ZISH Zoltan consumed the last quarter inch of his comfort-tube in one bad-tempered inhalation. He squashed the butt flat among twenty others in the jade litter-tray on his desk.

The office breathed opulence. The desk was four feet wide and the pile on the carpet was extravagantly thick. Even the little white clouds drifting by the window looked deferential.

ZZ was a big man. His chair was made specially wide and deep for him. His easter-egg shape suggested he had lived big and played big. The bags under his eyes were big. His wallet was fat and heavy. His suits, shirt, socks and ties were the best. ZZ was also big in the Twenty-seventh Century entertainment business—he was Zoltan of Zoltan's Galactic Wonders. His life, home and business boasted every modern luxury, innovation and comfort, but still this morning ZZ was far from happy.

He raked in a pocket for another comfort-tube, burned it and sucked fragrance.

"Sometimes," he complained loudly, "sometimes I am wondering for what I pay you twenty years, Jove. What lousy return do I get on my investment?"

ZZ was not talking to himself. The first of seven communicator screens, on the wall facing the desk, showed the fidgety image of a man.

Jove Jones was no happier than his boss. A horrific kind of fixed smile sat on his face like a film of oil on troubled water. He looked as though he were trying to expiate the curse of his first name, which was Jovial.

JJ was as small as ZZ was big. He had been born with an old face. It was even money whether his suit or face had more wrinkles. One time someone had cruelly told him to stop hiding behind his latch-key; he was that thin.

It was his smile that made the lingering impression. ZZ, who was no less cruel than the next man, had once said JJ's smile looked like a mortician job. It was certainly cheerless, glassy and a great strain to hold in place. It broke up somewhat now as Jove waxed enthusiastic in counter to his boss's attack.

"Listen, ZZ, I got this one'll really rock ya. It's a Garpin female. She's a hundred and eight Garpin-wise which makes her an Earth teenager. She's a lulu and she can sing with it. Hold on to your seat!"

JJ somehow managed to inject excitement into his voice. The only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing missing was a flamboyant arm gesture and a Tah-rah chord from an orchestra.

ZZ watched the screen balefully. It went blank, then lit up to show a Garpin girl.

Like JJ had forecast, she was okay. Garpin is one of those habitable planets in the second spiral of the galaxy. It has a big sun and a big gravity factor and its dominant species has a light bone structure, a long neck and an extended life cycle.

The girl warbled a few notes and danced a couple of steps on four of her six dainty limbs. She had plenty of throat to sing in, thought ZZ charitably and, like most Garpins, she wasn't unattractive to a human but hell!—how was this one different from any other Garpin?

"Nuts!" he said rudely. "Novelties, Jove—novelties! Get her off!"

JJ's mournful face took over the screen again. "You mean she didn't send you?" he said disbelievingly. "She's the best prospect I saw since—since— And she has the nicest bottom bare none!" It was a JJ joke, but it fell flat on Zoltan.

"I wanta see bottoms, I wanta see human female bottoms. I go stand at the bottom of a walking elevator someplace. Listen, stumblebrain—people coming to see Zoltan's Galactic Wonders are not interested in alien bottoms to that extent—and especially not Garpins' what they have seen in mine and the competition's shows too many times before! You been flipping space so often at my expense you developed queer tastes. My clients squeal for novelty, variety—don't matter if they can't act. Look at those Sirius-Eight wrestling jellyfish. That filled the house two weeks!

"Hen-Garpin bottoms—even if the tops *can* sing—bah! When I'm wanting novelties you find me freaks—when I send for a love act you slop up something sexy—when I wanted something to tickle my Stag Night's tastes whadda you deal me—a Calypso hermaphrodite who got its pleasure all wrapped up already. Jove, I don't know why I'm paying you to comb the galaxy when all you're delivering me is the dandruff!"

JJ's face didn't even twitch; it still looked cheerfully mournful. Just the eyes changed slightly—a look of weary loathing came into them. Jove was used to Big Z's scorn and bullying. He had taken it for twenty years. But this morning Zoltan had run through all his discoveries and it was obvious the big man was determined to book nothing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As though he sensed he was now able to deliver the coup-de-grace, Zoltan asked, "That *all* you got to show me?" He extinguished another comfort-tube and glowered at his frontiersman.

"Looks like it, ZZ." Jove veiled the look of loathing in his eyes and went on. "Just one idea comes to me—hell, I don't know."

"Come on, bum, you better tell me before you disappear and spend more of my money digging up freaks and zombies that ain't no use to me. With you on my staff I gotta clutch at straws."

"Couple of months ago, this crazy old guy called me from the backwoods. Somewhere up north. He used to have his privateer license years ago. Picked up an alien menagerie over the years. Retired and been selling it off an' wanted to know whether I'd go up and see one or two he had left."

"What would he have that a big outfit like ours hasn't already picked up?" ZZ shifted in his chair. "Did you waste time going up there?"

JJ sounded evasive. He said, "Some of those old privateers went to weird places in the early days. They pulled in some queer things before the Rights Commission stepped in with limiting areas and conservation laws."

"Well—did you go up, I'm asking you? It coulda been cheap, just Earth-traveling instead of bumming around in expensive spaceships."

"He had some odds 'n ends," Jove admitted. "But he had one queer thing he said he wouldn't part with." The thin man paused and fidgeted.

"Come on!" ZZ exploded. "Ya dumb ape! What did he have? What was it?"

JJ wagged his head. "He never really let me see it. He said he wouldn't let it go and it was the last of its kind anyhow. He said it was a Switcher."

"Switcher." ZZ mused. "Never heard of one. Where's it from?"

"I'm telling you," complained JJ. "He wouldn't talk about it or let me see it."

"You beanhead, why aren't you telling me this weeks ago instead of loosing off into space dreaming of hen-Garpin bottoms and finding no talent? Maybe the old guy was kidding you, but if he wasn't here I am with a unique alien slipping through my fingers maybe to the competition! Get me the address quick and then call him and tell him Zish Zoltan of Zoltan's Galactic Wonders is on the way up to see

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his Switcher. And Big Z don't take no for an answer. Then get back on the road yourself and spend my money on finding me talent, while I do the hard work here."

Jove shrugged. "Okay, boss," he said meekly. He watched the big man heave himself out of his chair and waddle across acres of carpet toward the door. One of these days it would be nice to have that office and give ZZ a taste of what he handed out to his employees. JJ looked at his watch and wondered if he had time to catch the next space launch. What a living!

THE sign was an old one and hadn't weathered too well. Leaning uncertainly, it pointed upward and made a statement. *Private Road. Residence of Glazier T. Hope. No Thru Route. No auto signal.*

ZZ read the message and glumly compared the width of his auto-way skimmer with the width of the road. He switched the drive to manual. He was alone and murmured aloud several colorful opinions of backwoodsmen as he steered into Glazier T. Hope's private byway.

Since Jove had talked to him the day before, ZZ had become even more intrigued. He had spent all afternoon researching his huge sound and video tape library for a clue to the mysterious Switcher. Nothing had emerged. He still believed he might be on a wild goose chase.

The sight of Glazier T. Hope's residence, and of the old ex-space privateer emerging from it, as the auto skimmer glided into the clearing, did nothing to reassure him.

The length of the old man's hair and beard, his odd socks and the egg stains on his cardigan suggested he had lived alone for a long time. With a sinking feeling, ZZ realized that the mysterious Switcher might well be a figment of the old man's imagination.

He immediately began to invent horrible fates for Jovial Jones, but there was no trace of mayhem in his huge rubbery smile as he left the skimmer to greet Glazier T. Hope.

The ex-privateer was leaning on a heavy stick with his right hand. He didn't move to shake the pudgy, well-manicured hand ZZ held out. The Big Z's smile wavered but stayed put. After a second or two he dropped the scorned hand and said, "Zish Zoltan. Hi!"

"You'll be Mister Z. Zoltan," said the old man as though he hadn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heard. "Got the wire that fella Jove sent me. You wasted your time, Mr. Zoltan. Switcher ain't for sale. He ain't for giving away, neither. I got shot of everything else now, but Switcher ain't moving. We've lived together too long."

"Well now, Mr. Hope—or why don't I call you Glazier and you call me Zish—who said anything about parting you?" ZZ let the big waves of his bargaining manner curl over and break on the retired explorer. "Zoltan's Galactic Wonders don't just want to steamroller through the world flattening everything with their bankroll.

"Now look here, I'm coming nearly a thousand miles north just to see something unique in my line of business. Why don't you let me have a look at your phenomenon? Maybe if I like it I could get one of my own from wherever it originated. That's if you really won't part with it."

Glazier regarded him suspiciously. "I won't. And you won't get another, neither. The S.R. Commission shut down that area long since. I don't like it, Mr. Zoltan. I wish you hadn't come so far for nothing."

ZZ had already begun to feel his excess ounces trembling with excitement at something in Glazier's last remark.

"Listen, Glazier," he said, taking the old man by one arm and steering him through a hundred and eight degrees to face the house, "that just isn't the kind of hospitality old space buddies show one another, now, is it? Why don't you give me just a look at this Switcher? Hi—maybe we could come to a hire arrangement. Five thousand C's a month. How does that strike you?"

It obviously struck the old man pretty hard because his head didn't shake so fast this time. But he shook it nevertheless.

"No. It ain't even safe, Mr. Zoltan."

"Come on. I've handled some pretty nasty things in my time."

"No. If Switcher has the chance he'll escape. I won't get him back."

"I hire the best security men in the business," ZZ wheedled. "Don't forget I been handling aliens for fifteen seasons and my license is still clean."

"It ain't like that. You don't understand." The old man sounded sad, but he had begun to walk toward the house.

"Okay, then. Let's see him and maybe I'll appreciate the problem better." ZZ followed excitedly. The old privateer kept shaking his head and muttering.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE house was dim and old by 27th-century standards. The room Glazier unlocked with an old-fashioned key was entirely in darkness. The old man closed the door behind them so quickly that Zoltan found himself plunged into a pitch black cube of air and silence.

"What now?" he whispered toward the old man's musty smell and creaky joints in the darkness.

"Do exactly as I say," Glazier breathed. "Listen to me. Half of this room is Switcher's cage. When I turn on the light you can look at him but don't look him in the eyes—never do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Don't keep shootin' questions at me. Just don't look Switcher in the eyes—ever."

Kid-stuff horror-comic, thought ZZ contemptuously. I probably seen aliens a lot more frightening than anything he has to show me. Old clodhead. Parked out here in the backwoods dreaming of the wildlife he turned up on the fringes of the first spiral fifty years ago. Probably thinks Kappa II voles are a sensation or maybe, like that stumblebrain JJ, that hen Garpins throw me into ecstasy.

"Go ahead—what's holding you up? Throw the switch."

Glazier T. Hope threw it. ZZ blinked, focused in the subdued light.

Glazier warned, "Don't forget the eyes."

Behind a floor-to-ceiling glass wall Zoltan watched a shape. It moved. It drifted from a corner of its cell toward the partition. ZZ sucked in his breath and tried hard to remember what the old man had said.

It was difficult not to look the Switcher in the eyes. Its eyes were the only things which bore any resemblance to human features. They seemed to serve a brain: a dark, immobile mass contained sometimes at the head, sometimes at the foot, sometimes at the center of a nebulous structure of constantly restless shape which at times might pass for a body and limbs and at other times a mere sighted agglomeration of gas.

ZZ turned aside quickly to avoid the wistful, bush-baby eyes which had fastened themselves to the inner wall of the glass cage to regard him inquisitively.

"Great. Sensational. Never seen anything like it. Atomic structure, must be about as dense as heavy gas. Fabulous! Where did he come from? How'd you keep him?!"

"Never you mind. You seen him now. I'll put-the light out again and we'll leave him in peace. He's getting old like me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hold it," cried ZZ. He could already see the telly-ad and the sky sign over the Galactic Wonders Club. *Zish Zoltan presents Space Wraith. Unique Survival from Dead Planet. The Eyes without a Body search your Soul.* "Hold it—you haven't told me what gives if you look it in the eyes."

Glazier said, "Don't you dare." His hand was reaching for the light switch.

ZZ grabbed the old man's arm. The bone inside the cardigan sleeve and thinly stretched covering of flesh was as brittle as a bird's. "What is it—hypnosis? Thought reading?"

"I'm warning ya," said Glazier. "Don't risk it. Leave Switcher in peace where he is."

"I have to know."

The old man shook his arm to free it. Zoltan was intoxicated now by his discovery and the thrill of wanting to possess it. He clung to Glazier. He turned his sweating face on its rubbery folds of neck and with defiance stared deep into the unblinking eyes that clung to the glass wall.

It was nothing for a moment; a kind of numbness, then a sensation of floating, levitation, freedom. Just for a fraction of a second ZZ tried to fight it, realizing that his own pig-headedness had placed him in danger—then it was too late.

From a position which seemed to be cloudlike and simple he suddenly found that he was watching the capering antics of some flabby, egg-shaped individual who had unaccountably appeared on the other side of the glass wall. He had a suit just like ZZ's and—hell! an identical tie. And what was he doing, trying to climb on the table and flapping his pudgy arms like a bird, scaring that poor old other guy out of his wits?

Horrified, ZZ recognized Glazier T. Hope. He raised a hand to rap on the glass. He wanted to stop the antics on the other side. Nothing rapped. There was nothing to rap with. ZZ looked at his hand. It was made of gas or smoke. Maybe it wasn't even a hand. With a feeling like falling off a skyscraper he understood where he was and why you ought never to look a Switcher in the eye.

GLAZIER T. Hope had tried even at the last second to put out the light, but the crazy impresario was too strong and meaty for him. Then, as ZZ found out, it was too late.

Glazier backed off to see which way the switch would take.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Switcher, after all, was older now and might be interested in less vigorous escapades.

But it was going to be the bird. Glazier recognized the symptoms. Switcher had been intrigued by birds since Glazier first brought him to Earth. There were no flighted creatures on Switcher's home planet. Trouble was, the poor dumb alien had never latched on to the fact that anything as ill-suited as Zish Zoltan couldn't get off the ground just by flapping its arms.

Well, he'd warned that smart aleck, hadn't he? He drew back into a corner of the room, gently hefting his heavy walking stick.

Zish Zoltan's body, tenanted by Switcher, capered past him, tweeting and flapping like a demented, overweight starling. Glazier flipped the stick up and back and let him have it just behind the left ear.

"CHEAP!" said ZZ, coming round. Glazier had dragged him into the living room and now watched the fat impresario cautiously. The noise from ZZ was faintly birdlike and the ex-privateer didn't know whether he might have to use the stick again. But Zoltan had been having a private fantasy.

"Cheap," he insisted, looking at his hands, obviously delighted to be himself again. "Five thousand a month's too cheap. What a baby! What a trip! He's gonna be sensational. How'd he switch back? How do we do it?"

"Put your hand atop your left ear," said the old man.

"Yipe!" ZZ felt the lump tenderly.

"Switcher can't stay in an unconscious individual," Glazier explained. "So he switched back as soon as I knocked you cold. An' he can't switch out unless someone's dumb enough to look him in the eyes long enough for a hypnotic hookup. So you're safe now."

"Safe," burbled ZZ. "He's gonna be a sensation! I'll rent him for ten c's. I see it all already. Those bored society dames and guys who've played out everything from golf to space-hunts getting switched—watching themselves playing birds from inside Switcher. A wow! Wow! Wow!"

Glazier clutched his stick convulsively, but ZZ wasn't playing animals again. He was merely being enthusiastic.

"Damn dangerous," said Glazier. "Supposin' he starts switchin' around between half a dozen people. You'll never get him back 'cos you won't know where he's located. And he might even switch folks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back into the wrong skins without knowing it; a sort of dual switch."

"Ya mean I'm too stupid to see who's being a meadowlark?"

"It don't always take 'em that way. Switcher's a real experimenter. Sometimes he'll lie kinda quiet for ages. He likes hide-and-seek, too."

Zoltan said, "So we'll make it exclusive. Maybe a private room—a few special guests and we'll knock 'em all out at the end with fun gas or somethin' as part of the show so Switcher *has* to switch back. Stop putting in objections. Just make me a bid. I'll cover it okay. Zoltan's Wonders don't have money problems. How's about twelve c's a month?"

"You're plumb star-crazy," said the old man.

ZZ caressed his lump. "He'll be a sensation," he murmured admiringly.

AND he was. Or rather IT was; because Switcher had no sex and switched equally happily into whatever man or woman dared look into its sad, sad eyes.

Within a month of Big Z's opening billing, ***Switcher, The Space Wraith with the Power to Liberate YOU from YOURSELF*** had the Galactic Wonders Club booked solid for a year. The twelve c's a month rent ZZ was paying Glazier T. Hope looked like a handout in comparison with the impresario's earnings from the space wonder.

Everyone in the vast metropolis who could afford it and all the bored international traveling set were fighting for admissions. One of the credit-card companies set up a hire-purchase ticket scheme. The lucky ones who looked into Switcher's eyes saw themselves translated for a few ecstatic minutes into birds, fish or voyagers in strange places known only to Switcher. Afterward most of them happily joined the lengthening waiting list for another trip—regardless of the fact that the wait might well last a year or longer.

It was a much changed situation Jovial Jones returned to after another lengthy space tour. The Galactic Wonders Club had become Zish Zoltan's Switcher Dream Hall. Big Z didn't appear to have any other billings at all.

The lugubrious JJ expected no thanks for putting the big man in touch with the owner of the wonder. He wasn't even surprised to find ZZ his usual impatient and offensive self, when a clear line was finally established to one of the office communicator screens. What did surprise him was Zoltan's reaction when they were face to face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yep. Who are you? Whadda ya want? I'm a busy man."

"ZZ—it's me, JJ. Jovial Jones. Your frontiersman."

A flicker of recognition rippled over the big man's rubbery face.

"Oh—you! Hell—I'd forgotten about you. Where've you been?"

JJ told him. "I see the Switcher—I put you on to him, remember—turns out a sensation, ZZ."

"You put me on to!" squeaked ZZ. "Why you didn't have enough intelligence to catch it. I coulda lost it to the competition if I hadn't acted so quick myself."

JJ looked sad. "I got ya some real interesting specimens this trip, chief. Could bill swell with this Switcher—"

"You stumblebrain! Do I have need of anything but Switcher now! Anything else would ruin me. The public's having from Zish Zoltan what the public wants, baby. And the public wants Switcher. And the public pays for Switcher. Hallelujah! Go pour your other space-freaks into a drain. Collect a month's salary and don't bother me any more. I don't need you. And so long—I'm a busy man."

In front of the black screen, JJ sat for a moment astonished. Then he drew a finger expressively across his throat and made the sort of noise he hoped disposing of ZZ might sound like. Twenty years! The 27th century and people could still do that to you! Collect a month's salary and don't bother him any more!

With malice in his heart JJ left the palatial office suite. He was fully prepared to spend a chunk of his severance pay on a look at the phenomenon which had cost him his job. He learned, however, that twenty years in the Zoltan organization had earned him no priorities on the waiting list. After thinking for a while he checked his efficient filing system and took a trip north.

Glazier T. Hope's recently acquired wealth hadn't made much change in his manner of living. Jovial found him sitting in his bare living room staring moodily at a tri-di color production on Channel 716. He still wore the same cardigan and the stains on it confirmed his continued taste for eggs. His hair and beard were both longer and grayer.

He didn't recognize JJ. When Zoltan's ex-employee reminded him, the old privateer scowled.

"Sure, now I recall you. So it was you sent him. I was happy until that big barrel of grease came and hired Switcher off me. The place ain't been the same without him. I surely do miss him. And that rubber easter-egg don't even let me get to see him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Take him back," said JJ. "He's yours, isn't he?"

"That wise guy has me sewed up with contracts and lawyers and Lord knows what other tangles." Glazier shook his head.

"Last time I was here you wouldn't tell me about Switcher. You want to tell me anything about him now? I was away. I don't know why he's such a sensation."

The old man explained Switcher's uniqueness and virtues between many sighs, lengthy digressions and colorful descriptions of ZZ's character. Jove listened. Particularly he was interested in how Switcher switched and when. He asked questions. He found out what precautions ZZ took to safeguard his wonder. He bacame even more thoughtful behind the mourning expression he always wore.

"How much of the cash ZZ's paying you would you be ready to put up to have Switcher back—or at least not have him used so much and away so much?"

"The lot. Everything." The old man's answer was unhesitating.

"Listen," said JJ. He turned off the screen and pulled his chair closer to Glazier's.

As the words came spilling out of JJ's undertaker's face the ex-privateer began to nod. He nodded more vigorously. His eyes caught a twinkle they hadn't had since his traveling days.

Finally he burst into a cackle of true laughter.

"Okay," said Glazier T. Hope. "Fine. I don't hold no brief for him since what he done to me and Switcher. He don't strike me as no lovable character either, seeing what he done to you."

"Uhuh," JJ grunted. "And no court in the World Fed could call it murder. Not even if they found out." He thought for a time, undisturbed by Glazier's occasional chuckles. "If it doesn't work we won't have another chance. You sure the Switcher'll recognize your sign and come to you?"

"Sure as I'm sure of anything. He belonged to me thirty-one years, near enough. He had to rely on me to survive on this planet. Now he ain't seen me in nearly a year. When I give that little singsong noise he won't miss it, believe me, wherever he might be."

"Let's see if we have it straight," said Jovial. "We'll have plenty of time to discuss it, but let's just see if we have it straight so far."

"Okay," said Glazier, "let's see."

FROM speakers concealed in the sumptuous drapes around the roof came a long roll on drums. A spotlight picked out the white din-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ner-jacketed flabbiness of Zish Zoltan, perspiring and imperial at the microphone.

"Guests (boom)! Friends (bo boom)! Fellow experimentalists (boom boom)! Welcome to the Zish Zoltan Dream Hall (applause). Tonight—like every night—Big Z presents the unique, the only SWITCHER (prolonged applause).

"Folks—friends—whoever dares look the Space Wraith in his melancholy eyes is transported (gasps). Transported into experiences impossible while you remain locked up in earthly flesh and bones (awed silence).

"Some of you will have been here before (murmurs of assent); some of you will be tasting a unique experience for the first time (murmurs of delicious apprehension). For those of you who are new I must ask you to observe a couple of simple rules.

"The first is to remain seated and quiet whatever happens. The person possessed by Switcher has to be anesthetized to make sure Switcher switches back into himself. It's quite harmless and painless, friends. and it assures we all finish up being ourselves and not someone else (more excited whispers).

"Rule Two is also simple but an important safeguard. You must never look into the eyes of anyone Switcher's riding."

JJ listened to the simple but important rule. He wanted to hear it from Zoltan. His palms were sweating badly as he sat in the shadows at a table near one corner of the stage. It had cost amost all Glazier's accumulated earnings to buy tonight's seats for the Dream Palace show from someone high on the waiting list, but to Glazier money hardly mattered now.

JJ glanced at the old man. Glazier's eyes were fixed on the draped object in the center of the stage, which must be Switcher's cage. JJ hoped the ex-privateer wouldn't be too distracted, by seeing his old friend, to remember their plan.

"And now (boom)! Friends and fellow trippers—let's throw the rules aside. Let's enjoy ourselves! I give you the SWITCHER—surely the strangest alien ever to excite Earth beings! (another drum-roll, drowned by excited applause."

In the din, JJ leaned toward Glazier and asked, "You still have it all straight?"

The old man looked at him in a dazed way for a moment. He nodded abruptly.

"Don't lose sight of Zoltan," warned Jove.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Glazier nodded again dumbly. Then his gaze went back to the center of the circular stage. Collapsing drapes revealed, to the gasps of the audience, the glass box in which floated, mysterious, intangible, the shapeless shape and staring eyes of Switcher.

One of ZZ's maids of ceremony called a number. Each guest had been allocated one and, when it was called, took his or her turn to approach.

The first girl became Switcher's bird. Switcher nearly always started with a bird. Glazier T. Hope smiled wistfully. The bird was so real that the girl hopped onto a chair and flapped merrily until she broke the straps on her evening gown. She was anesthetized to prolonged applause.

Number Two was a middle-aged lady who wouldn't have made a good bird because she was as meaty as ZZ. But Switcher gave her a trip nobody recognized. She sang long involved songs in a language some pundits in the audience claimed to identify as a dead tongue from planet of the second spiral. She was finally carried away with a seraphic smile on her face.

Two men followed. Then it was JJ's turn.

As he jerked himself from the table he kicked Glazier T. Hope out of his trance. "You ready to go? For crisakes don't hash it or I might be lost for always. You're on your own. Come on—wake up!"

"Don't fret so," said the old man. "You get on with your side of it."

JJ sidled across the stage and up to the glass box, trying to keep his face turned from the audience. If ZZ recognized him—

Feeling fluttery, as though he already had a bird inside him. JJ gulped and looked deep into Switcher's eyes.

There was nothing, for a moment that lasted long enough for Jove to feel panicky. Maybe Switcher wouldn't switch and the whole plan would collapse. Then there was a kind of numbness, followed by a sensation of floating, levitation, freedom.

JJ found himself watching a thin, mournful little man with a suit like a sack. He didn't look as though he could afford admission to the Dream Palace. He was giving a very credible imitation of a fish. With the same shock of realization as ZZ had once experienced, Jove recognized himself.

Trapped inside the volatile form of the Switcher, JJ pressed his huge eyes to the glass wall. He tried to pierce the shadows beyond the dark stage and the dancing spotlight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Was that Glazier moving quietly toward Zish Zoltan's table in the middle of the floor? Or was it just one of the maids of ceremony with drinks for the customers?

There was a quick rustle of movement. Some heads turned but most of the audience still laughed and applauded the antics of Switcher who now turned JJ into a musical instrument.

The real Jove saw that ZZ was standing up. The impresario had at last recognized the performer. If he stopped the show now, the plan failed. That *had* to be Glazier coming behind Big Z. With relief, JJ saw that it was Glazier indeed.

The glass cage was soundproof. JJ couldn't hear whether the old man was carrying out his part of the plan.

The thin man suddenly stopped being a musical instrument. He listened. Jove watched himself propelled by Switcher toward Zish Zoltan's table. Other guests scattered. Most covered their eyes to avoid a dual switch, but ZZ stood as though his thick little legs had taken rubbery root.

Glazier proved craftier than JJ had imagined. He stood squarely behind Zoltan.

The spotlight had followed JJ/Switcher across the floor. From inside the glass box Jove could now see everything clearly. And everything was happening at once.

The Dream Palace anesthetists rushed forward. JJ/Switcher dodged them. Too late Zoltan put his hand up to shield his eyes. Switcher was already staring out of JJ's and deep into Zoltan's Switcher was looking for his old friend and master, whose call he could recognize from somewhere behind ZZ.

Just as two of the attendants grabbed at JJ/Switcher, Zoltan gave a little squeak. At the same instant Glazier—with all his old accuracy—thumped the impresario behind the ear and felled him.

Jove in the cage felt the same numbness, the same sensation of disembodiment that accompanied switching. He didn't even see his corporal self go down under a heap of Dream Palace anesthetists.

He was unconscious for minutes. When he came around he had a painful throbbing behind the left ear. He found it hard to sort out why a couple of Dream Palace anesthetists were propping him up and being nice to him.

The Dream Palace was still in turmoil. JJ squeezed his eyes and when they opened and could focus again, he found that he was looking at his old self, held between two of the brawny DP boys.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What the hell's happened?" he groaned. His voice sounded strange.

"You okay, boss? One of the trippers went beserk. Some old guy hit you instead of him." The speaker jerked his head in the direction of a duplicate JJ.

"Listen to me, will ya?" bawled the prisoner, in the voice of Jovial Jones. "I'm Zish Zoltan. The Switcher's dual-switched us. I don't know who the hell that is in me but I'm in here."

JJ looked at his hands. They were new, fat and well-manicured. His suit was white and very large and expensive and the wallet in his pocket felt heavy. His little legs were fat and rubbery.

"Oh, no!" murmured JJ. That wasn't his voice either.

"Don't worry, boss. The poor guy's been stretched. He thinks he's you. We'll sort him out with drugs. But 'fraid something worse happened. Switcher's loose—escaped. Don't you worry—we'll get him back."

"Listen, Lew—Bellman—get me outa here. Get the Switcher back. Who's that in me? Is it that nitwit Jove Jones?"

Contemptuously JJ watched himself struggling to get away from his captors. He looked around. The glass cage was empty. There was no sign of Switcher or Glazier.

"I hope Glazier takes better care this time," said JJ softly.

"What was that, chief?"

"Nothing. Forget it. Help me up." JJ realized he had to take charge of the new situation before anyone knew what was wrong.

He found that he could walk quite well on ZZ's fat legs. He would start on a slimming course as soon as he'd settled down. Might as well put Big Z's body into shape if he had to inhabit it.

He waddled to a confrontation with his former tormentor, now conveniently trapped in JJ's body.

"Listen, JJ—stop acting and go get some sleep," he said. "I'm too tired to deal with you tonight. You wrecked my show, you bum. You better be in my office tomorrow early and start telling me your plans for something to take Switcher's place—stumblebrain."

The two men glared into one another's eyes but there was no catalyst to switch them now. Switcher was gone.

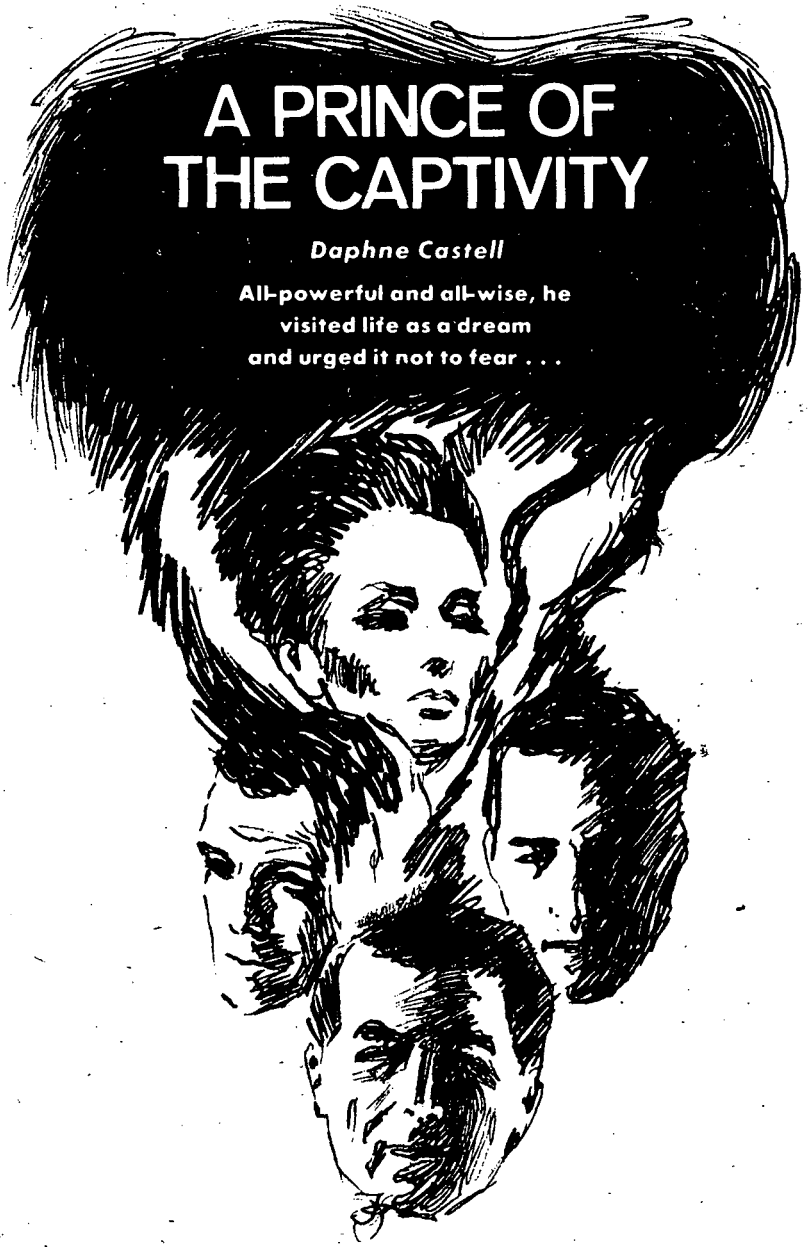
Nobody in the Dream Palace could see that ZZ had much to laugh about, having lost the incomparable Switcher. Yet he was chuckling when he climbed into the Zoltan autoway skimmer and started enjoying all the big, big things in Big Z's intercepted life. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A PRINCE OF THE CAPTIVITY

Daphne Castell

All-powerful and all-wise, he visited life as a dream and urged it not to fear . . .



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HE CAME stalking painfully out of a bloom of darkness which tenderly covered half his little world. He was the dominant, because the only, intelligent species of it, and he represented it in himself alone. Once, perhaps, there had been others; but this had been so long ago, that he could not be sure he had not dreamed it.

Plants whistled dryly in the breath of his passing. Some only faded on their stems; some, the weaker ones, blackened into rottenness.

A birdlike thing, covered with soft glutinous bubbles, planed sideways, unwarily close to him. It powdered as it fell and was nothing before it reached the ground.

In the tiny valley which he approached, warning of his coming reached a small group of mobile creatures, gathered busily round a tall metal thing. They looked up at the inevitable chill and the sounds which preceded his coming.

He was aware that smaller animal creatures died, though death would not affect him, except by his own will. Apparently these things died too. Certainly some of them dropped like dead animals.

Several scrabbled, shrieking, at the soft soil, pushing blinded faces into it. Others ran open-mouthed, in long wails of fear, aimlessly, anywhere, as long as it was away from him. The chaos displeased him and he acted.

He called time to a halt about him; he checked the distraught leaping life-streams and examined them. He recalled the dead ones to life, and froze them out of sentience. Now he alone had life and movement in a temporarily non-living world.

He had seldom bothered to turn his perceptions outside his own world. They were not infinite, but they extended now, as he made the effort, to the nearer reaches of the Galaxy. He perceived that there were a large number of beings, totally unrelated to one another, flying, or creeping, or moving at speeds of light, about the universe. It puzzled him that there should be so many of them to each world; there was, after all, only one of him.

He was self-sufficient and, if these others existed, he would have expected them to exist on the same plane. But he saw that they communicated and had relationships, two entirely new concepts, which it took some minutes for his mind to adjust to.

He turned his attention back to the beings on his own world, entering their minds with a sense of apology. He could not examine them physically, for he knew with sadness into what unmentionable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changes and corruptions he could give the living matter of his own planet, if he approached it too closely. He did not need to eat, since his tissues were practically self-restoring.

He touched with thinned perceptions and infinite delicacy every aspect of the creatures before him. Some were large and spiky, more vegetable than animal, some tiny and many-limbed, some pink and two-legged. The pink, two-legged things, it appeared, from the repository of their thoughts, had initiated the expedition. They thought of the vegetable beings as Aldebaranians, and the tiny multi-limbed things as Martians, but the Aldebaranians called themselves G'han- G'jest, and the Martians had no spoken words, communicating by empathy. They appeared to him to lead lives of complete confusion, having so many different customs and desires that they could not easily understand one another. And with all this, it was necessary for all to learn each other's languages, though the Martians were exempt from this need. The pink things, the Terrans, had more impatience, fierceness, urge to dominate, and treachery than the others; he possessed none of these qualities himself, naturally, but he was aware of them in the unintelligent animals who also lived on his world.

What were these races good for? How far should he permit their stay on his world? He became aware of a glitter within himself, a surge in his cells, which he had not felt for eons. He recognized curiosity, almost lost to him, and eagerness, which he would never quite lose, and something else he had never felt before, because there had never been need for it. He reached out and tapped the mental reservoirs of the dormant beings. They had it too. It must be an infection of the mind. They called it, variously, urging discontent, longing, wishes, desire.

All he had known so far was serenity.

He searched further and found other unknown concepts—love, hate, fear, contempt, avarice, friendship, humor. All terms meaningless to him, but which the recesses of their brains provided terms of reference for. Friendship and humor, particularly, he thought he might learn to know, to understand, even to feel.

These races built, thought logically, made drawings, experiments and designs. And they died, after a remarkably short space of time. Most animals of his world lived far longer. It was a pity they had all run mad—he wanted—the words were new, the meanings unclear. But he would not have come near enough to have harmed them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

physically. There was a rising sense of excitement, as he considered that the damage was not irreparable. He crouched on the fading sand, breath rasping stickily through his many extended members, and considered the matter afresh. He could retire and watch. It was new, it would change things for him. It could be worth doing.

He drew up the severed threads of time again, knotted them, and resumed existence for the creatures at the moment before they had seen him.

Then he went to his own place in a wide swath of impatient destruction, lowering himself over deep oozing thresholds, closing behind him all possible traces and knowledge of himself.

THE Terrans, the Aldebaranians and the Martians rose from their places on the trampled soil, looked dazedly at each other for a while and went back to their work beside the metal ship.

One of the sensitives, a Martian, sat down feebly moaning and waving its limbs. He hoped it would recover fully. He had begun to feel an affinity for its peculiarly absorbent and reflective type of mind. What they would call *friendship*, perhaps.

One of the Terrans asked another, "You feel all right? Something in the air, maybe? There's a good deal wrong with poor Taliel. Look at him—he won't be fit to work for hours." The other Terran shrugged and waved its limbs in imitation of the Martian, but its body shook uncomfortably. The relationships between the different creatures, and their purposes, were difficult to understand, but he soon learned to assimilate the vocabularies, and to compare and sort out the nuances held by thoughts and words.

The Aldebaranians were colder, more restrained, more business-like (business seemed to be one thing to one set of beings, another to another set). They ate little, and always apart from Terrans. Martians nourished one another with their own secretions, and led a very close life, community (friendship? dependence?) being everything to them.

Terrans were more complicated, and some were more likeable, more easy to assimilate than others. There were differences in the race, which apparently meant that they bred, as some of his animals did.

The Martians had a method of breaking off a limb-bud and nursing it in a nutrient fluid. The Aldebaranians could change sex at will, and though the Terran sexes needed two to reproduce, the Al-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

debaranians could do so at will, with an intermediate larva stage.

The men were one type of Terran, the women another, and between some of these there were close relationships, as between his own animals and birds at mating time, except those that were crystalline or amoeboid.

He began to see that a race structure so complicated necessarily produced more complicated beings, and he wondered that his own powers were not surpassed by theirs. Apparently the hardships of evolution on their world, and the struggle to conquer interstellar distances had resulted in a complete orientation towards survival and rivalry, not necessarily betterment or self-improvement.

He found the women's minds quieter and more pleasant to rest in, but not so mobile or so capable of full appreciation as the men's.

It was a woman, however, that he finally chose for direct contact. He would have preferred a Martian, but empathy with others was an uncertain quality for them, though perfect between members of the Martian race.

This one was tall and thin by her people's standards. She was recently allied with a male of her race. The alliance was anticipated as lasting. Both of them had been subjected to treatment on thier own world, and this treatment was designed to render them hardy and resistant to the smaller-than-visible creatures which bit or invaded animals on his world. A sensible precaution, he found, in a race which did not automatically produce its own defenses, and seemed to be assailed by imperfect qualities of various cells, which they called *disease*.

He touched the woman's mind one night in her sleep, and she stirred and woke with a cry, which she tried in vain to explain to her allied human, who was both bad-tempered and stupid. The touch was fleeting and inconclusive, but in that slight moment, he found qualities that he had been unable completely to trace in the tranced state of the time lapse.

He found scents and sounds, nostalgia and regret, tastes and shapes and sensations, that he stored and brooded over and dissected, until they meant something to him.

Watching the intruders on other days, he saw an Aldebaranian overcome by some odor that was pleasant to Martians; he saw a Martian retreat from Terran singing; and he saw two laborers, unloading, fall to blows, to be separated angrily by a heavier Terran.

The concept of disagreement and deliberate injury was so dif-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ficult to accept, that he wondered whether to watch further. It seemed to him the greatest possible happiness was not to destroy involuntarily. To do so on purpose was unthinkable. These beings must fall somewhere between intelligence and animal impulse.

He must know whether his world was safe with them—he had naturally no fears for himself—and why they wanted it. Above all, he must know how to come to terms with them, to communicate openly, to meet them in relationships which he now knew he craved. The craving was a thing quite new to him. Behind screens perhaps, or from caves, or perhaps even with a continent between them; but merely exploring their minds was no longer enough.

It must still do for the time, however, until he was sure that it was right to reveal himself.

So he went once more to the thin woman's sleep and put himself into her dreams, working his way through her thoughts, giving her to understand that he was a creature of her mind, and would vanish when she woke.

SHE felt him at once, as a humorous, impatient, friendly, curious unseen figure, strangely gentle and powerful. He flooded her brain with whispers of warmth, reassuring companionship—something she had not yet found in the sleeping mate beside her—and she relaxed and accepted.

"Who are your people? Why have they come?"

"We are people from many worlds. The men are always impatient for more trade. They formed this expedition with the other races, and we are to establish a transit post here. The men say it is all right, but the women—we are tired and frightened. We should like to go back to our warm green Terra. The Martians are afraid too." Yes, he had seen that. He regretted it, but what was done was done.

Transit post he could not understand, except that it was temporary, even by their meager standards. They found his world useful, though.

"You do not like this planet?"

"It is not a bad planet, but it is arid. And there is something wrong." He withdrew for a moment. Then he came back to ask again: "Why are there many of you? Are you all so imperfect? Can you not renew yourselves? Are there other worlds and other beings? Beings, for instance, like me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She struggled, in her sleeping mind, to understand what he lacked and to explain to him social contacts and emotions. She told him of Terra and what little she knew of the rest of the universe. She had not been a great traveler, until she came here with her mate, and she knew little outside her own solar system.

She explained what she could of alien and human generation and organs and functioning.

"And this planet is uninhabited," she added, "which is rarer than one would suppose. We do not dispossess original inhabitants, if we can help it. That is one thing we learned from generations of space travel."

They had learned something, then! There was a burst of pure spontaneous joy and amusement from him. Her mind translated it as laughter. Then he withdrew for the last time. When she woke, she had a slight headache, no memories and a belief that some dark circle of fearful expectation had gone from around her. She remembered only, in a sense, that her memories failed her at some point, that her dreams were definably broken by some blank. She wondered whether she should tell her husband, the others, that she was not well, perhaps that her mind was affected. But they were likely to believe contemptuously that she found the work too hard, or the surface of the new world too strange. She did not want to be numbered among the many pioneer women who had fled weeping back to the familiar soft lands they had always known.

The work on the site went on, experiments, journeys, trials, though the Martians, the sensitives, still lamented dolefully from time to time.

A death-song, they conveyed. Terrans and Aldebaranians had respect for the prescience of the tiny creatures. They asked cautiously if there were some kind of disaster coming, something to be averted. If the Martians anticipated a death, which of them was it to be? The Martians merely seemed puzzled. The feeling filtered through to the minds of their questioners that death was always somewhere, far or near. That this was a death that affected them. They were wandering philosophers, delighting in sophistries too deep for minds that had to deal in the spoken word. How did anyone know, they conveyed, that he was not to die at any moment, at the whim of the universe? Everyone was a child, a toy, an image, a pet animal.

Each night now, when the the thin woman slept, she felt and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

recognized in her dreaming the probes of a new inquiring intelligence, a splendid mind, ageless, totally alone, independent and curious, with a natural capacity for emotions which it had never used before, humor, understanding, pity, affection. In the daytime she did not remember it, but she felt an instinctive void, a sense of loss. At night, however, she was joyfully and willingly a prisoner of ideas, bound by a constant exchange of thought.

Now she wanted to know, with the sleeping part of her, what he was, and who and where. She had never had an entrant into the depths of her being before. It was like the lighting of a house by a clear stream of electricity instead of the slow flutter of coal or candle flame.

AND in his turn, he wanted to know whether there were others like him on worlds unimaginably distant. Was there anywhere he could go without bringing fear and death? Since there had possibly once been others of his kind on this world, perhaps even more powerful than he, might they not have traveled by the star-lanes to other planets?

To begin to know this, he must reveal something of himself, and for the first time in his memory he could not decide.

The site was taking good shape. Sheds, pits and machinery had been installed and were being tested. Animal and vegetable tissue passed in and out of the mobile laboratory.

"In another few months," she was told, "we shall be finished. Then perhaps we can take a holiday. We've all worked well—perhaps we can go back to our own worlds for a while, before we come here again to settle. Or we may start on some new venture. Successful settlers are a fairly rare commodity. They may send the second wave after us and ask us to experiment with an empty new world elsewhere."

He found all this in her mind that night when he came to her, and it decided the issue for him.

He began to release a faint veiled flow of images, an edited version of his functioning and his appearance. With this release went thoughts fashioned into a kind of entreaty: "You asked to know—you wished to learn. Learn now, and do not remove yourself."

He felt the first faint stirrings of recoil, and went on more urgently: "I need to know too. I must know. Can I live, in any way at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all, in contact with other beings? I had my own happiness here. I knew of nothing else until your people came. Why should you implant knowledge and wishes in me, and go away, leaving me unfulfilled?"

She knew a vast eager sense of friendship, of downright love, for all other living beings who might exist, and then she was cut off behind a slow blotting of horror, as more and more knowledge of him came to her.

He felt the shrinking, the withering, the refusal, the first signs of flight into thankful madness, and knew this effort was hopeless. He cut off the flow of images and flung her almost casually into normal sleep. He left her and, without decision or forethought, ranged from body to body in the sleeping sheds, dredging whatever knowledge he might of other races, careless for once of what damage he might cause. They had, after all, damaged him beyond repair.

He catalogued and examined dispassionately. There were stores of weird things, imprints on the sleeping memories of grotesqueness, sweetness, some sharp, some too strange or too horrible to remain exact, for their edges had obviously been dulled by mental editing.

But there was nothing like him. Nowhere else was there anything like him, and the nature of his existence was such that denied all possibility of awareness and acceptance of him by any living creature. Anything meeting him directly must take refuge in death or insanity. For him, the universe was very empty.

He could have put other creatures into a perpetual light, pleasant hypnosis; then, without approaching them physically close enough to damage, even through hypnosis, he could have achieved a substitute for communication, for understanding.

He chose not to do this. He had one great limitation, that he could not change his substance; but he could unmake himself.

He would leave his world to those who had thought it uninhabited; and so it might have been for any effect he would leave behind.

He set in process the mental effort that would destroy him; and as his consciousness seeped slowly away into long darkness, he had a last spark of thought, a regret that he could not have known and watched the Martian sensitives and the thin woman, for longer.

In a long wooden hut, the thin woman woke, weeping. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THAT OTHER DIMENSION

M. G. Ogan

The best time for murder? The killer had one answer, his victim another!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BIG John Sarelli, an elder statesman of The Combine, buys murder wholesale. Any Combine employee abruptly summoned to his penthouse on the Hotel Royale in Las Vegas was bound to be nervous—especially if he'd been dabbling in diamond and Swiss-watch smuggling from Tijuana to Los Angeles without including The Combine in the action.

Dirty Eddie and Crumby Schwartz are Big John's bodyguards. They frisked Tim Kent in the penthouse foyer before announcing his arrival to Big John. Tim's pale but coarsely handsome face bore an expression of disgust as Dirty Eddie's big hands slapped the pockets of Tim's imported Italian suit.

"What's the matter, fellow?" Crumby Schwartz asked him. "You look kind of white around the gills."

"I'm not used to being frisked. Now I'll have to send this suit to the cleaners."

"You some kind of germ nut?" Dirty Eddie asked. "I washed my hands the day before yesterday."

"He's got tender skin," Crumby explained. "Soap and water breaks him out."

"So what's your excuse?" Tim asked Crumby, when Dirty Eddie waved him into the penthouse.

BIG John was a hulking man in his middle sixties. "You got to take what bodyguarding help you can get these days," he explained to Tim. "I got that foyer wired for sound, so I was listening when you smarted off to Crumby. Don't do that again. Crumby gets offended real easy."

Tim noticed that gray now streaked Big John's bushy black hair. But aging had not softened that craggy face, still pockmarked by shotgun pellets from the bad old days in Chicago.

"Build a short drink," Big John growled, and his voice—to Tim—sounded like rocks turning inside an otherwise empty cement mixer, "but don't sit down, because this won't take long."

"Can I fix you something?"

Big John shook his head. "My ticker ain't so good any more. A drink and a blonde a week is all my high-priced croakers allow me."

Tim had just spilled two jiggers of gin over cubes of ice as a foundation for a Tom Collins when Big John said, "You've got a new job, boy. You're going to lose three or four million for The Combine during this fiscal year."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tim gulped the gin neat. He tapped the side of his head with the heel of his hand. "It must be the change in altitude," he said, "but I thought you said something about *losing* money."

"I did. We have a new foundation in Santa Barbara called the Organization for Unusual Scientific Research. As the director, your job will be to back every crackpot who comes along with something that can't work, like perpetual motion machines, stuff to grow hair on bald heads; things like that. Since you got no record yet you're The Combine's choice."

"What's my take?" Tim asked.

"You get a salary, stupid! Stop talking like a hood. It's twenty-five grand per annum, on the books, but you only take home ten grand."

Tim decided two more neat jiggers of gin might still his throbbing financial nerve—with Combine enterprises, and his moonlighting, he'd become accustomed to an income in excess of $100,000 a year.

"You going to ask me *why* you only get ten of the twenty-five grand?" Big John said. "So don't ask, I'll tell you. Phil Kilby, that bright-eyed college boy you recruited, has been up here six times in the last two months, bending my ear."

Tim's stomach did a slow roll.

"The Combine is going to hold back fifteen G's as a down payment on what you owe us we're not supposed to know about," Big John said. "You sell that bachelor pad you got in Beverly Hills and kick in what you get for it to us, and do a good job in Santa Barbara. Maybe we'll forget your little sidelines."

"Yes, sir."

"Now get the hell out of here," Big John said. "We got you a first class scientific advisor in Santa Barbara, this Otto P. Wentz, the muddle-head that got himself fired from Cal. U. for suggesting to the students they lynch the dean of men. You and him should have no trouble dropping a bundle for us."

THE Combine had bought the Richland Estate outside Santa Barbara to house the new foundation. Dr. Otto P. Wentz was a tall, thin man with an asetic face and a wild crop of silky white hair he seldom combed. His deep-set slate-gray eyes always seemed slightly out of focus.

It was Mrs. Wentz who rocked Tim. 38-24-39, she'd been a graduate history student when Dr. Otto, as he liked to be called, led his abortive student revolt. She had left the campus with him as his wife.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Smoky green eyes, dark red hair, and a sensuous mouth—Nancy was the kind of wife, Tim decided, Dr. Otto should keep cloistered in his ivory tower under lock and key, or supply with an improved chastity belt, if he meant to let her run loose while he puttered in his laboratory. Instead Dr. Otto insisted that Tim use Nancy as his private secretary.

"What's the catch?" he asked her, when they were alone for the first time in Tim's office.

"I can neither type nor take shorthand," Nancy said, "but my dear husband wants foundation money to develop a teleportation machine."

"A which?"

Nancy smiled. "A device for transporting a person from here to somewhere else, instantly, without benefit of airplane, automobile, bicycle, or hiking. Crazy, isn't it?"

"It sounds like a sure money-loser. How much does he want?"

"Half a million."

"Make out the check," Tim told her.

Nancy said quietly, "There's something you should know before that gleam in your eye is too dazzling for me to resist. Otto has the libido of a mouse, but the jealousy of a lion, and he has his machine far enough along to accomplish astral projection."

Tim scowled. "What's that?"

"We all have an Aura," she told him. "It's sort of an invisible bodily envelope. Otto's Aura is liable to be watching us any time and any place, so hands off?"

"We'll play it cool," Tim agreed.

"Before you sign that check," Nancy said, "there's something else you ought to know. The pilot model of Otto's machine can project animals bodily."

"This I have to see," Tim said. Dr. Otto's pet dog, the mixed-up result of a doberman mating with a beagle, was snoozing on the patio outside Tim's office. Tim pointed to the slumbering dog. "Can you teleport him?"

"Watch and see." Nancy left the office to return with a machine that looked like a hand-held TV camera, crossed with a kid's death-ray gun. She adjusted knobs, set a dial, pointed the lens at the sleeping dog and pulled the trigger. There was a low, whirring sound.

The dog disappeared from the patio instantly, to awaken with a yelp in a patch of rose bushes a hundred yards away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tim blinked and rubbed his eyes. "I saw it, but I don't believe it."

The dog was out of the bushes, licking at his punctured hide.

"I hate that mutt," Nancy said.

"Can he really make a machine to teletransport people, do you think?"

"I'm not sure, but Otto is a genius . . . in the lab. With enough money . . ."

"Make that check out for $750,000."

Nancy cocked her head. "You're thinking some bad thoughts, Tim."

"I know a certain man with a weak heart and a wall safe that contains anywhere from half a million to a million in cash," Tim confided. "He's narcotics buyer for The Combine."

"If we were to materialize before his eyes . . ."

"You're getting the picture," Tim said. "I was a first class safe-cracker before The Combine recruited me."

"If Otto's People Teleporter works," Nancy said, in a dreamy voice, "I want half the action."

"Baby, you're the most important part of the action," Tim said earnestly. "We get Otto to teleport us into Big John's Las Vegas penthouse, we peel the wall safe, and away we go."

Nancy sighed. "Where?" she asked.

"We'll think of somewhere Otto's Aura can't find us," he promised. "With all the ready cash we'll have, that shouldn't be too much of a problem."

Hell, the whole thing is impossible, Tim thought, *but then—what about that damned dog?*

DURING the next four months, Tim signed checks for an inventor of an electronic mousetrap, a man working on a syrup that would grow hair on bald heads; a glassy-eyed nut who had an idea for a do-it-yourself rocket kit for private interplanetary travel.

Occasional cold drafts in his office, when he was about to make a pass at Nancy, convinced him that Dr. Otto could, somehow, project his Aura. He finally asked the scientist about it.

"Instead of using a lot of words you'd have to look up in a scientific dictionary," Dr. Otto said, "why don't you let me project your Aura? I can assure you it's painless."

As a safe expert, Tim's photographic memory had been extremely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

helpful in casing locations he intended to work, so he made a careful drawing of Big John's penthouse; dotting its exact location in Las Vegas.

Tim discovered that $750,000 buys a lot of esoteric laboratory equipment.

"Just step into that glass-enclosed booth," Dr. Otto told him, "and I'll send your astral self exactly where you've indicated."

Tim had no sooner closed the glass door than he was no longer in the laboratory—instead he was standing in the living room of the penthouse, only a few feet from Big John and his blonde of the week.

"Honey, I feel a draft," the girl complained.

"Shut up," Big John told her. "I'll buy you a mink later, but right now . . ."

Tim snickered soundlessly. And then he was back in the glass booth.

"Did you enjoy your journey?" Dr. Otto asked.

"It was pretty short," Tim complained.

My God, his teleporter may really work! The thought prompted Tim to ask, "How much more money do you need to set up this junk to send complete people?"

"Oh, another half million would help a great deal," Dr. Otto said.

"You have it."

Dr. Otto beamed. "I'll stay with it day and night," he promised.

Dr. Otto kept his promise. He locked himself in his lab, snatching only a few hours of drugged sleep each night. Nancy was keeper of the sleeping pills so that her absent-minded husband didn't take an overdose.

It was moonlight, and a balmy August night, when Tim told Nancy, "Tonight, we sample. So give our friend husband enough to keep him way under awhile, okay?"

"I take it I'm propositioned," Nancy said cooly, but there was a glint in those smoky green eyes.

"He's gone beddy-by for at least two hours," she told Tim later.

They decided on a wide, long stone bench shielded from the house by dense shrubbery. "It's too dangerous in the house," Nancy explained. "He's been so kooky lately that he might walk in his sleep."

"When will we know if his deal works?"

"The day after tomorrow. He's finishing what he calls 'another dimension' for the Teleporter."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Color, maybe?"

Nancy shook her head. "I really don't know."

TIM was relaxed and mellow an hour later; Nancy was rubbing the small of her back and other places in that area. A stone bench, she said, played hell with a girl's anatomy.

"You weren't complaining a few minutes ago."

"Lover boy, I had no reason to complain then," she said, patting Tim's cheek with a perfumed hand, "but hadn't we better split? It's drafty out here."

"I hadn't noticed," Tim said.

NANCY persuaded Dr. Otto that she should join Tim in the Teleporter for the first projection. "You should know whether it works for the female as well as the male," was her argument.

Tim designated Big John's penthouse in Las Vegas as their landing spot. "I want to surprise a friend of mine," he explained.

"Be sure you stay exactly where you're put down," Dr. Otto cautioned. "Otherwise, I may not be able to bring you back here. I have some ideas for eliminating that drawback to the Teleporter, but I'll need more money."

"I'll sign you a check as soon as we're back," Tim promised.

He and Nancy crowded into the glass booth. "What's that digging into my rib cage?" she whispered.

"A gun," Tim said. "I've got it in a shoulder holster, in case shock doesn't croak Big John, and then there's a pair of guys he keeps around I'd like to eliminate."

"You think of everything, darling."

Tim grinned. "I sure try."

"Ready?" Dr. Otto called from the massive control board where he'd been snapping switches; checking red, green, and blue lights; and doing something with a small computer neither Tim nor Nancy had ever noticed before.

"Do your stuff, Doc," Tim said joyfully.

Tim and Nancy shivered as a tingling sensation coursed their bodies—there was the feeling of swishing at incredible speed through time and space.

"What the hell?" Tim explained. "He's landed us smack in the middle of a location set in the desert, instead of Las Vegas."

Redskins were pounding around the circle of covered wagons. Tim

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tapped a bearded extra who was firing a muzzle-loader over the tongue of one of the wagons. "Where are the cameras and the director?" he asked the old man. "We have to get out of here."

An arrow smacked the old man between the shoulder blades and Tim saw its flint point project through his breastbone.

"I never knew this movie stuff was so realistic," he said, as the old man coughed blood and dropped in the sand, face down.

A spade-bearded man glanced up at Tim. "Stranger, the Spanish call this Godforsaken hole *Las Vegas*," he said.

"You're putting me on!" Tim scoffed.

An arrow whistled past his ear.

"You fool, this *is* real!" Terror had turned Nancy's pretty face into a mask of ugliness. "That other dimension must have been a time machine. I've read about this in the history books."

"So where are we?"

"Right in the middle of the Las Vegas massacre." Her wild, hysterical laughter chilled Tim. "No one survived it . . . not a single soul!" ∞

GALAXY, March 1971

A TIME OF CHANGES
Robert Silverberg

○

PEGASUS TWO
Ernest Taves

○

AFTER SEX—WHAT?
Theodore Sturgeon

NOW ON YOUR NEWSSTAND

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE AGENT

Richard Hill

Space Rock took the world by storm. Then came Post-bomb Rock and a funny little man—or was he?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE first week in November a gigantic saucer appeared overnight in People's Park. It was Wednesday morning, but everybody was on strike from work, so the crowd gathered quickly. They held meetings to decide who would greet the spacemen and to plan defensive moves to keep the military-industrial complex from making first contact. Obviously, it was argued, the aliens wished to contact the People; otherwise why would they have appeared here? But arguments broke out among various groups—Maoists, Trotskyites, Marcusists, Buckleyites, the three splinters of SDS, Black Panthers, Hell's Angels and others—all claiming to represent the People best.

The arguments became so violent that defenses were breached before anyone noticed and the saucer was surrounded by members of Berkeley's elite Paratroop Police Vice and Insurrection Squad. The People looked at the Parapolice flamethrowers and realized it was too late. Allen Ginsburg arrived and led them in chanting "Om" but nobody really felt good about it.

Inside an hour, every news medium in the country had it covered, from CBS to the *Oregonian Philatelist*. A State Department team was on its way, the Hot Line lit up and Japanese students demonstrated spontaneously, demanding their government give Okinawa to the saucer people.

Then Sam Grossmar gave the word.

Smoke gushed from beneath the saucer and otherworldly noises came from inside. Light panels began to flash beneath the aluminum foil. One Parapoliceman incinerated another in his haste to escape destruction of the aliens. The saucer slowly opened.

To reveal: ALIEN CORN! The band was already playing and an announcer's voice rose above their whoops and vibrations. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN," the announcer said, as slowly the crowd realized they were not being invaded, "INTRODUCING ALIEN CORN AND THE AGE OF SPACE ROCK!" Then Alien Corn really began to wail and minds were blown from Berkeley to Benares.

It was Sam Grossmar's biggest coup and took the country completely by surprise. While in October hardly anyone had heard of Space Rock, by late November nobody talked of anything else. There had been a few hard core fans before then, in Oakland, at the Einstein Intersection where the Corn played. But nothing like this. Until Sam Grossmar.

Sam had seen Space Rock coming, as he had seen other move-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ments. Or, more accurately, Sam had made it come. He had come by on a Thursday night, unannounced and unrecognized. The audience had been small and the Corn playing without their usual energy, but they had been enough for Sam Grossmar. He listened to Benny on drums, Ian on electric flute, Yarmolinsky on wind harp and Moog Synthesizer (the group's major expense which Benevolent Finance would have repossesed long ago had they known what to do with it) and Brendan, the group's lead vocalist and hydraulic ukulelist. Sam decided to make their fortune and offered to be their agent.

A week later Alien Corn appeared on Ed Sullivan, Merv Griffin, the Galloping Gourmet, Hollywood Palace, Dick Cavett, and a Dr. Joyce Brothers Special. The week after that they made three movies (the four of them running, slow motion, down the Milky Way, Brendan in comic battle with a Martian Prune Man, Benny, the lovable dumb one, hanging from Saturn's ring—that sort of thing.) By early December, they recorded 13 albums which were all Gold Records by Christmas. They had a *TIME* cover. They played London and met the Queen. They had it all.

THEY reacted differently to success. Benny, an eighth-grade drop out, was content to buy the Jack London Oyster Palace, where he once had shucked, and to fire his old employers, replacing them with two former members of the Grateful Dead, now out of work. That and a dayglo Honda, and he was happy. He put his fortune in the Hashbury National where it drew a meager five percent. He smiled at everyone.

Yarmolinsky, an unattractive lad who had been an involuntary virgin until the group's sudden success, gave himself over to pleasures of the flesh. He surrounded himself with groupies of every possible persuasion and complexion and seldom left his room at the Mark Hopkins except to perform. Caterers were astonished at the quantity and variety of things he ordered—carloads of grapes (union, of course), freezers full of chicken livers, cases of champagne, boxes of Tangerine Kool-Aid—the things he'd never had enough of before.

Ian was the creative one. In a language nobody could decipher, he wrote an opera which was performed at the Met. He also wrote a novel, using musical notation and an autobiography composed of photographs of fingernail clippings and sunburn peelings. People

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said he was a genius. People said he was on something stronger than STP, stronger than anything known on earth. He was given honorary degrees at Berkeley, Wayne State and Harvard.

Brendan underwent an existential crisis. He began to wander the streets in his performance costume—olive body paint and somebody's idea of Martian wings and antennae. He began to read science fiction and feel guilty about what he was doing. He toyed with various forms of the occult. He prophesied the discovery of Atlantis on Christmas, then disappeared in a black depression when Christmas came and Atlantis was not found. On New Year's Eve he turned up at the Essalen Institute, asking to be committed. People worried about Brendan. People said he was on something stronger than Ian was on. Timothy Leary wrote him a letter.

Everybody wanted something from Alien Corn. They hired bodyguards and even then found investment brokers on window ledges and reporters in closets. And they found Krim.

Krim had appeared one day in a new batch of Yarmolinsky's groupies, though how he got in nobody could guess. He was a misshapen imp of a man, with the most obvious toupee anyone had ever seen and a face that looked constructed of Silly Putty. His features were pulled permanently into an artificial grin.

Yarmolinsky called the guards as soon as he saw Krim, and the groupies gave little squeaks of confusion as the little man stepped forward. But before the guards could grab him, he began to talk. Yarmolinsky was so fascinated he waved the guards away.

"You chicks make the groove," Krim said. His mouth seemed out of synch with his voice and Yarmolinsky could not believe what he was saying. "You gas it, babe."

"Wha?" said Yarmolinsky, trying to revive himself after weeks of dissipation.

"You're bossy," said Krim. "You mothers really split the scene and I dig to manage you. I'm the freakiest agent in the universe."

Now Yarmolinsky was laughing too hard to talk, and the groupies giggled with him. Every time he looked at Krim's grin, he burst out laughing again. Finally he was exhausted and reached for the phone. "Wait," he said to Krim. "The other guys have to see this." Krim waited and grinned.

The others were not easy to locate. Grossmar always got them to a gig on time, but otherwise they had come to see less and less of each other. But Yarmolinsky kept trying. He finally reached Benny at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oyster Palace. One of the guards found Brendan giving away his money on Telegraph Hill and persuaded him to come. Ian, it turned out, was lecturing to the California Legislature, but would drop by later. Finally they were together.

"All right, King Farouk," said Brendan. "What's so damn important?" Benny smiled and Ian looked around as though anxious to be in the purer air of academe.

"Listen to this guy," said Yarmolinsky.

Krim stepped forward, grinning of course.

"You studs wig my skull and blow my cool," said Krim. "I want to manage you."

For a while nobody spoke. Then Yarmolinsky giggled. Soon they were all laughing. The groupies were laughing with them and Krim kept grinning.

"I'm a Freak City manager," he said, "and I'm going to make your scene."

"He's a goddamn narc," said Brendan with some impatience, and Ian nodded in agreement.

"If he is," said Benny, "he's the worst I've ever seen."

"Narc," said Krim, in genuine puzzlement. "Narc out?"

Krim was convincing. They decided to keep him around for laughs. Nobody who talked like that could be dangerous. He couldn't manage them, they explained. They had a manager, Sam Grossmar. But they liked having him around.

Krim grinned unchangingly and stayed. "You'll dig my jive some day," he said.

Krim was great at parties. The groupies especially liked him, with his synthetic-looking face and his vocabulary like a linguist's jumbled note cards. Grossmar didn't like the idea until he met Krim and saw he was no threat. "The guy ain't in this world," he said.

ALIEN Corn's careers continued to climb into February, though there was hardly anywhere left for them to go. They had imitators now all over the world—Michael Valentine Smith and the Strangers, The Water Brothers, The Martian Chronicles, Childhood's End and others—but they were no threat to the originators of the form. Now and then one of them would come up with a new instrument, but Sam Grossmar would buy it and somebody in Alien Corn would learn to play it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The commercial possibilities were overwhelming. They ran a line of boutiques, they endorsed toothpaste in their space costumes, they sold the rights to a cartoon series and a cereal called the Alien Cornies, they lost track of their corporate enterprises. Of course, Sam Grossmar didn't.

Some people worried that Space Rock was being watered down, that impure influences were creeping in. Some bands were already playing Soul-Space Rock, Space Acid, and other combinations. Even the Corn made an album imitating earlier groups. Some parents became worried and ministers denounced them. Brendan was in several scrapes with the law. But they were still on top in March and everyone was sure they'd stay there. Fan mags were calling them the elder statesmen of pop music.

Then in early April, when some of the snow was melting in Central Park, a workman found a large mound that had not been there before. Crowds gathered. Groundskeepers began digging. Reporters came and soon the park was crowded and spilling into adjoining neighborhoods. Finally a workman broke through. And out of the hole came five of the strangest looking creatures New York had ever seen—three-eyed, lizard-scaled, playing rocks and blowing on long, machete-like knives. The crowd shrank back and lenses zoomed in. An announcer's voice came from nowhere. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN," he said, "THE MUTANTS!" And Post-Bomb Rock was born.

Sam Grossmar, it turned out, managed them.

Alien Corn couldn't believe it at first. Could Sam really have betrayed them like that at the height of their careers? Ian was the group's spokesman, but the secretary told them Mr. Grossman was out of town. He would get in touch with them.

Mr. Grossmar stayed out of town, with the Mutants. He never called them and they called him less and less. Yarmolinsky's last groupie disappeared three days after the Mutants' debut. They were alone, they and Krim.

The crisis had drawn them close again and they spent many nights together in Yarmolinsky's hotel room. They watched the Mutants on Ed Sullivan, Brendan afterward throwing a Gold Record through the screen. They commiserated. They waited. They still had money coming in but no careers. June went by, then July.

On the first of August Krim made his move.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"YOU hippies ready to cool it?"

"Come on, Krim," said Ian, "you're a funny cat, but you ain't no manager. We're washed up." The others nodded sadly.

"I can guarantee you work every night, at twice the cabbage you been making."

"How can a poor creep who calls bread cabbage guarantee anything?" said Brendan. "Lay off, Krim. Give us a break."

"If no other way, I'll pay you myself," said Krim, still with that permanent grin. He pulled out the largest roll of hundred-dollar bills any of them had ever seen.

They all sat up. "Christ, Krim," said Yarmolinsky, "where'd you get that?"

"Secret," Krim said. "Is it a deal, bosses?"

They were all nervous anyway and hysteria wasn't far. At Krim's remark Benny began to giggle, then Yarmolinsky, then Ian, then Brendan. Soon they were all laughing, eyes full of tears, stopping only to look at the smiling Krim and begin again. As they laughed, Krim went to the kitchen and came back with champagne.

"Let's cop a pot of sauce," he said.

Benny was rolling on the floor now and the others held their sides. Krim poured their champagne.

Somehow the mood lasted, even after the laughter stopped. They were, against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, optimistic again. Ian, more sociable than he had been for months, left long enough to bring his own stuff to share. They shared it and still the mood lasted, only better. They looked at smiling Krim and somehow believed in him. "He's going to manage us," said Brendan with a kind of mystical conviction in his voice.

Then Krim also produced some stuff and everybody went under.

BENNY was the first to awaken. He shook his head, then regretted it. "Where the hell am I?" He was not in the Mark Hopkins, he knew. Krim, seated in a strange metal chair, was facing him. Grinning.

"Got a hang up, Man?"

"Hangover," Benny corrected. "Damn right. What'd you give us? Where are we?"

Behind Krim was a panel with lots of dials and switches.

Ian began to groan and Benny, wanting the others awake, shook

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yarmolinsky and Brendan. They came up slowly, not fast enough for Benny who had been looking around some more. He had seen their instruments piled in a corner near a window, porthole, what the hell was it?

Krim handed Benny a pill, gave the others the same as they came awake. "Hangover pill," he said, correcting his earlier error. "Square you right up."

Brendan lurched to his feet.

"Where—"

"I don't *know*," whined Benny, who'd been awake longer and was more alarmed. He had been the first to see the metal walls and the porthole.

Brendan stumbled toward the porthole, the others following. By the time they were there Brendan was white and speechless. They too looked out and saw stars.

"Sweet Jesus," Benny moaned and dropped to his knees.

"Momma," said Brendan softly.

The others said nothing.

"No sweat, heavies," said Krim, apparently worried about them and trying to make it easier. "You'll groove these bookings I got you. Fans who never jived a sound like yours before. I mean like you'll be a crash where I'm splitting you."

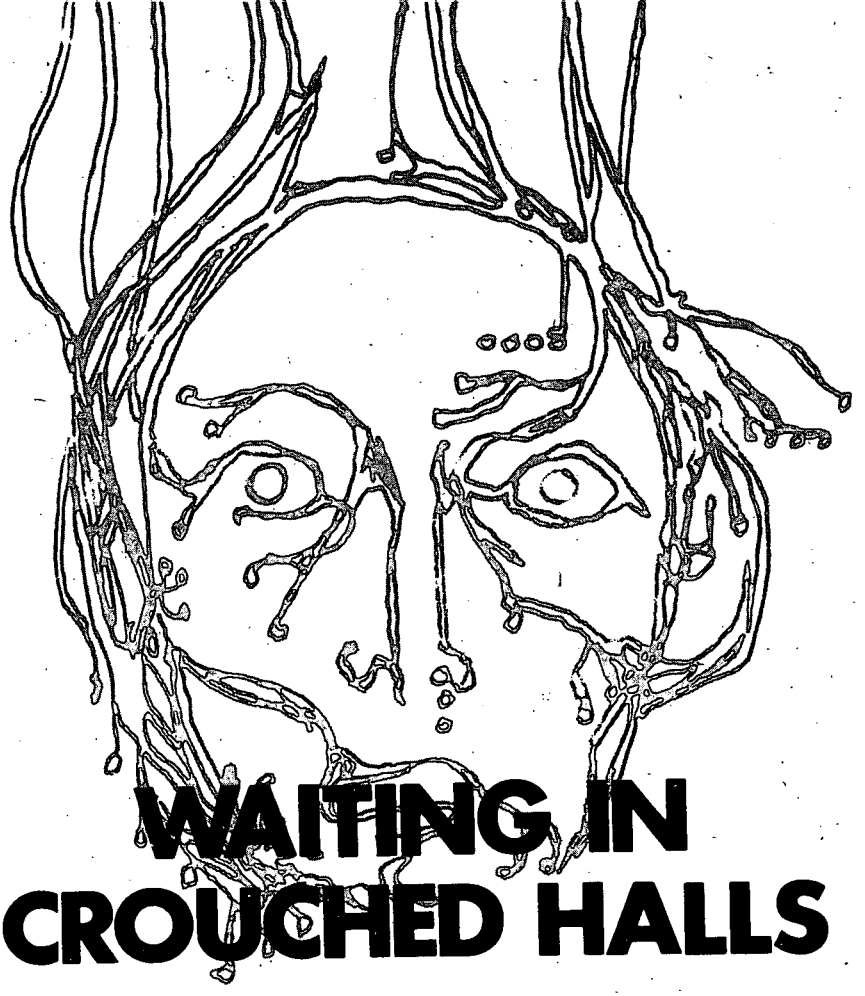
Krim was really upset now and talking faster. His linguistic programing broke down further as though the harder he tried to communicate the worse he did. His head jerked from one to another of them, his agitation increasing. The dime-store toupee went awry, revealing where the face mask stopped and his real head began. Ian hit a high note, the others filling in the chord a half beat behind him. They filled the ship with the sound of their fear, voices joined once again.

Krim tried to console them, continued to try to talk their language in the midst of their din.

"Listen, you mates," he said, then jerked the face mask away for greater freedom to speak. The Corn's performance grew even louder. "Don't rap so strong," Krim begged. "You're cutting the rug, fruggers. Gas it, man, work it, baby. Please, daddyos . . . come *on*, hep cats . . . you're the cat's pajamas . . . twenty-three skiddoo . . . "

But he just wasn't getting through to them. "I promise," said Krim at top volume, with all the conviction his electronic brain could muster, "you cats will be freaks where I come from." ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WAITING IN CROUCHED HALLS

Ed Bryant

Beyond death he lurks, the black feeder in null-space, to be trapped with a poisoned star!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WORTHY to be loved . . .

She screamed softly. The cry was low, not in pain or fear or hate. A scream compounded of an incandescent, sharp indrawing of breath melting into a moan, languishing into a whimper.

Her hands closed behind his head. She felt her nails digging into the corded muscles of his neck as she pulled his face down and crushed her lips against his mouth. His mouth gaped against hers and she bit his lower lip cruelly, tasting an intoxicating saltiness around her tongue. After the blood was his own tongue; thrusting, rough, swelling and exploring.

The quilted coverlet was softly tactile against her back. She lay utterly vulnerable and let his spread hands cover her shoulderblades, driving her body close to him. She closed her legs and felt him there. Her mind drove toward nova.

In shadow, faceless, he withdrew and left her.

She felt the loss.

AMANDA ripped away the gold strands from her head and tried to sob. Her head dropped back on the pillow and she stared at the soft green walls of her cabin. She grasped tufts of the sheet and clung so tight that nails bit into her palms.

Her body ached; her mind felt sick. She wanted to scream out the frustration and loneliness, as the dream faded irrevocably.

"Marc." She moaned the name, tried to say it again, stopped as the constriction in her throat stifled the word. Amanda reached out and plucked the pink cube from the slot in the console by the bunk. She blindly hurled the object and it caromed off a wall before rolling, undamaged, beneath an equipment locker.

Marc, she repeated in her mind. *Marc, Marc. I want you here with me now; not a faceless actor in a tape. Not coming into my body through a gold wire to my brain.*

She turned to the wall and weakly struck its chill with her fist, letting the surge of lonely self-pity roll across her, unchecked.

"WAKE up, Amanda." The voice was soft yet insistent.

"No." Her reply was remote, without inflection.

"Wake up, Amanda. Condition Black."

Hypnotic cues clashed into place and Amanda's deep-sleeping mind uncurled from its fetal ball. Her eyes opened painfully; she felt as though sand were spread beneath the lids. Amanda rubbed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her eyes, touched her face, felt the few dried tears still on her cheeks.

"I'm awake," she said. "Condition Black?"

"Correct." The voice came from the transceiver embedded below Amanda's temple. "Code Black William. The rest of the team is awake and fully functional. They will go under in seventy-four seconds. Can you match?"

"Yes." Amanda climbed out of the bunk. The wall of the cabin slid aside and she entered the control chamber.

Sixty-five seconds.

Amanda lay prone on the control couch, felt the customary claustrophobic panic as sinuous contours enfolded her body and she was cut off from external stimuli. She willed herself to be calm and waited out the warm darkness.

Thirty-three seconds.

Prismatic lenses clicked into place over her eyes. She possessed sight. The transceiver beeped and Amanda knew that Terminex was monitoring her. She had sound. Golden snakes of metal uncoiled into the cocoon of the control couch and mated with the implanted receptacles in the base of Amanda's neck. She had the rest of her senses.

Twenty seconds.

Circuitry opened and the ship became the extension of Amanda's body.

"Joined," she said to the transceiver.

"Seventeen seconds," said Terminex. "I will put you under at the ten second mark. At zero I will shift you and the others into null-space. You may then reassume control."

"Understood," said Amanda.

"I am switching off the transceiver," said Terminex. "We will resume communication in null-space."

Ten seconds.

She didn't feel the microscopic spray as the hypo injected micrograms of contrazine-L into the base of her skull. The effect was almost immediate. Her mind began its preliminary shivering of reality. She felt the beginnings of fear; perhaps this time would—

Zero.

Everything in the universe turned ninety degrees away from Amanda.

Her body felt infinitely huge, yet she sensed she was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

simultaneously less than a hydrogen ion. Gray shifted to red to the right side of her, blue to the left. Waves of drawn-out bass chords choked her nostrils and a peppermint crashing assailed her ears. In amplified, rebounding panic, she selected an arbitrary point on the blue/red border and pivoted her body/ship about it.

"That's it," said a soothing voice. "You are doing fine, Amanda." It was Terminex on the psi-link, the webwork of telepathic communication that intruded into null-space. "Just orbit your ship in relation to that point until you are completely calm." Amanda flashed an intimation of massed shoals—magnetronic equipment gleaming brittle and chill. *Terminex*, whispered her mind. *Bring me back. Hide me.*

"No," said Terminex. "I cannot. The mission is begun."

Please?

"No. Clear a receptor, Amanda. I have a briefing tape for you to absorb."

Amanda absorbed.

(Terminex, silver cube, featureless, speaking:)

Black William. Down-delving deep from the nonexistence of null-space he comes. He is hunger; an appetite ravenous, continual, insatiable. Material substance lures him, energy is his temptation, the life force is the greatest of bait. It is life for which Black William was originally programed to search. He is a sperm arrowing to the egg, but the zygote is life for Black William only. Union generates death.

I know little more; save that he seems to be partly machine, partly creature. I believe he is ancient. I do not know who created him. I know that he destroys and kills randomly; sometimes men alone in ships, sometimes entire worlds.

He feeds on them.

Two years ago the world of Ligaera Blue was the feast. The population of two billion died. One year ago, Black William glutted on Algol IV; five billion perished. Now he approaches our world. The change-winds have blown and he is cast to us.

(The scene changes: the image of Terminex fades, yielding to normal space)

Knowing the statistical possibility of his coming to this world next, I prepared a defense. The defenses of Ligaera Blue and Algol IV failed them. I have other weapons. You three—Amanda, Soni,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Marc—are part of that arsenal, as are your ships, the equipment you bear and even myself. We four may destroy where fleets have failed.

(Again the image alters. In the center of the stars' unblinking glaze, space seems to tear asunder as a shadow forms. A shadow of glimmering, hard-to-look-at black, writhing amorphously while drinking light in rather than reflecting it)

This is Black William as he appeared to my monitor beyond the periphery of this star-system only a short time ago. He is yet a light-day from this planet unless he has slipped back into null-space. In any case we must intercept him while he is still distant so that we may lure him into our trap.

I will withdraw all my links save the communication psi-relay. You are now in complete command of your respective ships.

THE sky was all about her, shimmering with hot and cold flashes of licorice. *Black William*, she thought. *Father/lover/avenger*. The thought was strange and it disturbed her. Amanda's attention had strayed and she found it difficult to locate the secure pivot-point about which she had orbited.

The voice of Terminex was edged steel in its clarity. "Force yourself to stop synesthizing, Amanda. Focus back on the pivot-point." The words were a laser through the sensory distortion.

"Yes, I'm trying." Amanda willed herself to regain the stability of her previous orbit. Slowly the bitter licorice sounds paled. She concentrated. Her sensory pickups began to distinguish the pivot-point, as the pulsing beacon of clear light signaled. The girl activated one of the autonomic systems of her ship/body and she was abruptly locked in an unbreakable homing bond with the bead of light ahead.

"I'm there."

"Good girl." The voice wasn't the inflected metal of Terminex. Amanda, momentarily surprised, let her concentration falter and the pivot-point wavered uncertainly.

Marc.

Amanda flashed a laughing face, oak-brown under curling black hair, eyes lively and glistening black like a terrier's.

"Hey, don't let me shake you," said Marc, sensing her disorientation. "Tighten up on that pivot-point."

Amanda did as he ordered. She gloried in that small obedience, a response that beat back the distorted geometry of null-space as she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

locked into a stable orbit of security. She waited tediously expanded microseconds for Marc Chenevert to speak again.

"You take suggestions well," said another voice maliciously. Cool, this voice—mockingly amused. The image flashed was soft raspberry hair, long and unbound; eyes green and so large they reflected the spiral of the galaxy in their oval depths; a body as sleekly graceful as a cheetah.

Bitch, thought Amanda without broadcasting on the psi-relay. *Die in blackness.*

"Be nice, Soni." Marc's voice, amused.

"I am," said Soni Martelli, flirting. "Always." She chuckled throatily. To Amanda it sounded like the purr of a predator.

"Where have you been, Amanda?" asked Soni. "Out playing with your synesthetic fantasies? Marc and I've been in visual contact and waiting for almost ten objective minutes now."

Lambent fires flickered underneath the response Amanda almost uttered. Tightly contained, she said, "No, I just lost control for a while. I'm all right now."

"Fine," said Terminex, rejoining the conversation. "I'm glad, Amanda. Any incapacity on your part would impair our collective efficiency."

"Well, I'm all right," Amanda repeated.

"Very good, then. Marc and Soni will rendezvous in visual range at your pivot-point. We then will move out to contact and destroy Black William."

"Great," said Marc. "I wonder whether we hunt the snark or the boojum."

"A what?" asked Amanda, bewildered.

"Nothing. Just an old poem I read once. This hunting of Black William reminded me."

But it was Black William, snark incarnate, who was the hunter.

AMANDA waited. Then the other two members of the team were *there*, bracketing her. Marc's *Rhomboid Blue,* an angular robin's egg looming out of the grayness to her vertical left; Soni's *Cat*, a tawny polyhedron to the right. Amanda's ship had no name painted on its prow. Amanda couldn't decide on a suitable christening, and no suggestion from Marc or Soni had satisfied her.

Blue and *Cat* danced in double orbit about Amanda and the pivot-point.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hello, Amanda," said Marc.

"Hello, Amanda," echoed Soni.

Die, both of you, thought Amanda suddenly, on a jealous level so obscure that her psi receptors didn't pick up and broadcast the thought.

"All right, children," said Terminex with an odd paternalism. "Link up and move out from Amanda's pivot-point in a spiral sweep. We will assume that Black William has reentered null-space. You will bait him back into normal space at the prearranged coordinates. Understood?"

"And off," said Marc, laughing like spattering mercury. "Let's go. Concentrate and link up, you two."

Along the psi-relay, three minds reached out toward the common ground of the pivot-point and linked in a tandem trihedral that extended into all the skewed dimensions of null-space. Three were temporarily one plus something inexplicably more.

"We go!" it/they shouted. Whirling outward from the pivot-point the hound-pack raced to the hunt. Behind followed the psionic shade of Terminex. Horizons opened ahead, constantly obscured and warped by the haze, flickering and shot with streaked color.

"Where red predominates," said Terminex. "Follow that. It leads toward my monitor's sighting of Black William."

There was an incarnadine beckoning.

The psi-linked three raced up beaded filaments shining sanguine. Crimson subtly muted to red.

Then black.

Midnight sucked in the hounds. The inconceivable hunger tore at the trinity, drove for the throat of their oneness.

"Aaah!" The cry was Marc's as unity cracked and flindered into mental shards. The three ships were individual entities, each whirling on a separate random tangent.

AMANDA *AMANDA* CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME THIS IS TERMINEX YOUR SHIP DAMAGED HYPO SPRAY IMPAIRED OVERDOSE CONTRAZINE-L INCREASING

WAILING in the anonymous night, Amanda drew her mother into the bedroom through the power of her screams.

The Widow Thisbi cradled her daugher in well-intentioned, clumsy arms. "There, darling," she murmured. "Hush now."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I saw him," Ananda said through sobs. "I watched him under the rocks."

Her mother's voice was strange. "No, darling, you couldn't. You weren't there. You were only dreaming."

"No," said Amanda, with all the tenacity of her ten years. "I saw him. It was just as Brother Martin told us."

She had seen her father leading the survey party, standing under the ledges to escape the summer storm. Heard with his ears the crackling warning and watched with his eyes the first rocks breaking loose from the heights above. Her vision had retreated and she watched her father crushed by the tons of stone. Amanda saw his face, creased with pain and dying; saw it look at her despairingly; watched as his face became the bone-white of a skull, then darkness writhing, grasping at her—

CONTROL AMANDA PURSUED BY BLACK WILLIAM TRY MARC AND SONI ATTEMPTING AID

The big man whispered, foreboding in his black suit. His styrene eyes were as hard as the table top. His voice was low and secretive in conference with his colleagues, but Amanda could overhear and sense, if not understand, the undertones:

"... latent telepath ... psychopathic tendency ..."

"... only ten ... too bad they're all ...

"... definitely needs ... for the sake of ..."

"... protective detention ... recommend ..."

"Come here," said the big man to Amanda as he stood, his suit and his shadow joining and forming a dark jaw that reached out, wider and nearer and—

MARC AND SONI CLOSING FAST CONCENTRATE THEY NEED YOU

The farm was beautiful and the years followed other years peacefully as Amanda slept and didn't dream, awoke in the green morning to play, and was faithfully tended by the machines. Then the men came to take her. They led her to the helicopter and there in the rear seats she first saw Marc and Soni.

Amanda sat shyly, apprehensively beside them and didn't notice the bite of the hypo-spray until darkness coursed up along her arm and warmly enfolded her mind—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FIGHT THE DARKNESS AMANDA STAY CONSCIOUS REMEMBER TRAINING

A school of two, Terminex and Amanda:

"This is null-space," said Terminex, his manipulator thrust out from the teaching console and holding the twisted bottle of nothing. "A place far beyond the three dimensions of *here*, a strange place where men and ships can travel beyond the limiting velocity of light. The only problem is that most men cannot travel conscious through null-space; they must sleep in hibernation."

"It's like dreams," said Amanda suddenly.

"Exactly," said Terminex, the teacher. "But a few humans are so fitted that they can live in null-space awake and remain sentient. You are one, Amanda. So is Marc. Soni too. Even though each of you must depend on a drug such as contrazine-L to retain the ability to maneuver in null-space. The drug gives you the ability to fix arbitrary points and navigate in relation to them within the effect of concentration."

Amanda had stopped listening. "I hate Soni," she said.

"Why?"

"I hate her." Because she likes Marc and has him any time she likes. The last was unsaid.

"Try to be friends with her," said Terminex.

"I will," muttered Amanda. But behind her, both hands crossed their fingers.

"The lesson is over," said Terminex. "It is almost time for the evening meal."

Amanda turned and stared at the window. The sun had gone and the sky was dark. Hungry black. Loving. Amanda screamed—

AMANDA EFFECTS DIMINISHING WILL THEM TO DISSIPATE COME BACK TO *HERE*

AMANDA skipped through the sun-shafts impaling the forest path. Ahead she could see a pair of vibrating shadow figures, their hands linked. Soni and Marc—

"Come on!" shouted Marc. "He's following us. Take my hand, Amanda."

She was a shadow figure herself and she took Marc's hand and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

three of them danced like wind through the glade. Behind them the forest turned from green to gray to deadly black, as though the sun were always sliding behind a cloud.

"Hold on," said Marc. "We're close now, very close."

"To what?" asked Amanda, breathless and disoriented.

"To the snark trap."

The path led into a clearing.

"It's here!" Marc cried. "All out to normal space."

And the clearing blazed up, a ball of fiery gasses glowing with an actinic glare that hurt Amanda's shadow-eyes. Then her eyes were no longer shadows—they were real again; and the clearing was gone and the fire was a white-searing star hanging baleful against the stellar backdrop.

"Excellent," came the voice of Terminex. "I am back on the psi-relay and monitoring your sensory inputs. Black William has diverted from his original course and is close behind you."

"Yes," said Soni. "There!" Not far from *Cat*, space swirled with an intangible dark distortion.

"The trap," said Marc. "Now we spring it."

"The three of you," said Terminex, "skim together across the corona of the star. You will eject your seeding devices into the heart of this sun, then return to the safety of null-space as Black William's hunger becomes his destruction."

Cat, Rhomboid Blue, and Amanda's unnamed ship swooped closer to the sun and behind them raged Black William, ravenous. The star was huge; Amanda could feel the roiling floods of radiation with her sensors. Close, so close—

"Prepare," said Terminex. Systems meshed synchronously in the three ships. "Arm." Devices locked into launching cradles. "Trigger." And they were gone out of the bellies of the ships. At close to the speed of light the projectiles plunged deep into the energy of the star—and performed their unique task.

"The reaction is beginning," said Terminex. "Instability is breeding the supernova. The initial fire-shell of the explosion will be charring this system's inner planets in minutes. Black William will not escape—this energy-eater will die of gluttony. Your job is done—return to null-space."

"What for?" *Cat* spun wildly. "Look," said Soni. She indicated the star. Mottled and angry, it ballooned toward the three ships. "Home. It's beautiful. I'm staying."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cat broke formation, hurtled toward the eddying sea of flame.

"You're crazy!" It was Marc. *Rhomboid Blue* plunged after *Cat*.

"Of course," came Soni's reply and she was laughing. "Aren't we all?"

Terminex: "Get out! The three of you; you're trapped between Black William and the nova."

"Snarks and bonfires," said Marc. "I'm getting Soni."

Amanda was in the middle. She hesitated and watched as her companions raced to meet the first fire-ring of the stellar explosion. For a moment curiously detached from the action—then suddenly, supremely passionate: "Marc, love, come back!" Too late for pleas.

Cat went first. Soni never stopped laughing until her psi-link flashed a micro-instant of searing agony and was blank. Amanda recoiled with the relayed pain. But it was mixed with her own supreme satisfaction.

Rhomboid Blue was close behind. On the psi-link to Marc, Amanda flashed his limbs charred and shriveling like spider's legs above the open fire of God.

Her mind imploded.

Foundations shift sky tilts. Run to chasm. Cautiously explore structures jumpy fear slowly slip inside: steps sounding hollow echoes in waiting crouched halls. Little rumble, instantly rigid inside nothing silence eyes darting breath skipping slowly unbend move gentle hard harder nothing untangle inside moving like rat skid through place of before. Run bounding for rock of only precious nectar distilled ecstasy. Mountains leap together stark red scream writhing solitude shriek black engulf

"I pulled you out," said Terminex, The speaker grill was above Amanda. "I overrode your command circuits and shunted you into null-space when you—when your mind reached its overload. I regret that I took action too late to save Soni from self-termination."

"Marc?" whispered Amanda, hardly conscious in a soft sea of healing liquid.

"Alive—barely. I was able to transfer him back to null-space in virtually the exact nano-second his ship was being destroyed by the supernova. I'm afraid his body is not reclaimable, but my surgeons have removed his brain and there seems to be little damage there. He is still unconscious."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Amanda wanted to weep.

"Black William is destroyed," said Terminex. "The immense outpouring of energy from the exploding star overloaded his intake capacity."

"Good," said Amanda because she felt it required of her.

"But all is not good news," said Terminex. "Another anomaly reportedly similar in nature to Black William has been discovered ravaging the Beta Lyrae system. I'm afraid that you must become the nucleus of a new team assembled to destroy it, Amanda."

"I want Marc." Amanda's voice was barely audible.

"For the new team?" said Terminex. "That may be difficult in his present state."

"I want Marc."

For a micro-second the computer mused. "I will consider it. There are implicit possibilities. You will be told. Now sleep, Amanda. Sleep and rest."

Amanda slept and dreamed and this time her dreams were softer than before. Except for the thought as she fell into unconsciousness: *Black William, thank you.*

AMANDA Thisbi's craft, repaired and re-equipped, swings in silent orbit around the blue-green disc of the planet. No longer anonymous, on one of its angular prows is painted the name *Pyramus*. Terminex ordered this done during Amanda's long recuperative sleep.

"My darling," Amanda whispers with paramount kindness and solicitude as she strokes the steel flank of her starship—of her Marc really, since he is now part of the permanent circuitry of *Pyramus*. You might say, Marc is *Pyramus*. An experiment in efficiency, courtesy of Terminex.

And when the chronometer decrees the artificial night, Amanda lies in her bunk and plugs the ship into the receptacles implanted in the base of her neck. She and Marc share the same dream-circuit; and it is supremely erotic.

In his other hours, unplugged from Amanda, Marc is usually quiet. But occasionally he screams and his speaker grills rattle with pleas for death.

And that is when Amanda comforts Marc, soothes him with the damning words: "I love you." ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HEART OF THE GIANT

Larry Eisenberg

These rulers of far realms incised all feeling from human hearts. But their captives knew that hearts can fail!

COLONEL Mauro was a discreet man. His friend Lata was one of the rare Sentient women who would accept a Terran man as a lover. She had cleared security, was kind and thoughful, but only as a salesclerk might be in a fine boutique.

"There's no real relationship here," thought Colonel Mauro sadly.

Nevertheless he enjoyed his weekly visits to Lata's home. Afterward, she would sit and chat with him about small matters and sometimes mighty ones.

"I am an oracle," she announced one evening. "I can foresee that my poor resources are inadequate for meeting the expenses of this apartment."

He drew two one-thousand credit occupation notes from his wallet and gave them to her.

"As an oracle," he said jestingly, "can you foresee anything about to happen to me?"

Her face grew sober. She reached forward and gently touched the eagle on his right shoulder.

"The star will swallow the eagle," she said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What does that mean?" asked Colonel Mauro.

The commanding officer of the Terran occupation forces, Mauro's immediate superior, was General Hinsley. There was little love between them but considerable mutual respect. Hinsley had political ambitions. As long as Colonel Mauro remained no threat to those ambitions he would be accepted by the general.

"I will not explain my remark," said Lata sagely. "Oracles never do."

In spite of his playful entreaties, she charmed him into another bout of lovemaking, not answering his question.

HE PONDERED her words when, back at his office at Occupation HQ, he discovered a sealed diplomatic packet on his desk. He slit it open and withdrew a handwritten document, a personal communication from the Secretary of the Solar Directorate. Colonel Mauro was flattered by this mark of favor.

The contents intrigued him. In a tightly reasoned argument, the Secretary pointed out the deficiencies of Terra, the crippling effects of its CO_2 saturated atmosphere, and the alarming reduction in the life expectancy of its inhabitants.

"The Sentient planet," he wrote, "offers so much more. It is rich in resources and thinly populated. The climate is attractive and the inhabitants are easily dominated as shown by their passivity in the late War. I think the hopes of the Terran people lie in mass migration to this new planet, establishing colonies that will insure the survival of the Terran culture for the foreseeable future."

Colonel Mauro reread the letter thoughtfully. He had personally pushed this point of view for some time now. He was not so sure of the passivity of the Sentients, but he was elated to find himself aligned with the most important political figure on Terra.

At the very bottom edge of the letter was a tiny postscript he had almost overlooked.

"I am approving Major Spencer for heart support. Confirmation will follow," it said tersely.

Mauro immediately called in his adjutant, Major Spencer, masking his elation with great difficulty.

"I've won a great privilege for you," he said. "You've been approved for the artificial heart device."

Major Spencer tried to look pleased but his reservations were apparent.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You don't seem to understand," said Colonel Mauro. "This operation will virtually double your life expectancy. With perfect heart function, your other organs will be relieved of the usual burdens of increasing age. Only the most important personnel are given this device. It's a very great honor for you."

"I appreciate the honor," said Major Spencer. "And you know that on the battlefield I've shown my share of courage. But I dislike surgery. And I'm uncomfortable at the thought of my circulation depending on a computer."

"It's a foolproof system," said Colonel Mauro. "The artificial heart is powered by an internal battery deriving its energy from treated electrodes placed in your blood stream. The controlling blood parameters of pressure, oxygen and CO_2 levels, temperature and so forth, are telemetered to the Central computer for monitoring. This information is processed in nanoseconds and control signals retransmitted back to your artificial heart. And *this* heart will go for two hundred years without failure."

"But what if the transmitted signal is interrupted? The computer transmitter might fail, or some interfering surface might shield my body from the signal."

Colonel Mauro smiled.

"Your questions are valid but they only emphasize the care and ingenuity that went into planning this approach. In the first place, the transmitting source is a modulated stream of neutrino particles. There is no way of shielding against this stream or interrupting it. Secondly, if the artificial heart should not receive a transmitted signal from the computer, it goes into an independent standby mode. So you see, all problems have been anticipated."

"Is the computer here at Command HQ?"

"It is," said Colonel Mauro. "And for backup there is an auxiliary computer located in the forest sector. Frankly, I don't think we'll ever have to use the auxiliary computer."

"I see," said Major Spencer.

He appreciated the importance of what the Colonel had done for him, but he was still uneasy. He was not superstitious and he did not believe in a soul, but he hated the thought of parting with his heart.

Colonel Mauro reached into his desk and drew out a rare bottle of Sentient *ragacsi*, a powerful liqueur with a subtle and intriguing character. He poured out two measures and handed one to his ad-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

jutant. He was sipping it with great pleasure when he was notified of the unexpected death, by his own hand, of the commanding officer, General Hinsley.

THE transition of command was handled smoothly and quietly. Colonel Mauro was elevated to Brigadier General in a simple yet impressive ceremony, held on an open cobbled square before the crack regiment of the occupation army. He wished it had been possible for Lata to be present, but that would not have been appropriate. The star *had* swallowed the eagle, after all. Was Lata's statement just a lucky guess?

His dark features immobile, General Mauro addressed his troops briefly.

"I will continue to carry out the firm but humane methods of General Hinsley," he said. "He was a great man. He exhausted himself by devoted service to Terra."

As he saluted his men, resplendent in dark gray dress uniforms, he was uneasy about the blatant hypocrisy of his words. He knew that he would be a far better commander than Hinsley had been. Still, he had mixed feelings about the role he would have to play. The Sentients were a proud and distinguished people. Keeping them under the thumb of an occupying army would not be easy. And the future of the Terran people would depend on his maintaining a safe region to colonize.

He dismissed his troops and went wearily to his new office. On the wall behind his desk, he had placed a photograph of the departed General Hinsley. He turned to the huge pile of papers on his desk.

He held a tactfully brief inquiry into the suicide. There was no publicity. The facts were difficult to determine although he discerned the Sentient touch everywhere and nowhere. Signs appeared of a delicate but intricate web of involvement and General Mauro did not want to pay the price of airing unpleasant details.

He received the three-hundred-page report on the inquiry, leafed through its pages carefully and then sent it by diplomatic pouch to the Solar Directorate. General Hinsley's widow came to say goodbye before returning to Terra. The official report said nothing about her role in the suicide but Mauro had his suspicions. Although not a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

young woman, she was still attractive. Black became her. His admiring gaze shifted here and there about her comely form. With great gallantry he kissed her hand as she left and was rewarded when her hand went up swiftly to caress his cheek. Then she was gone.

In the morning mail, he found an announcement of a special lecture to be given by Dr. Skacsi, the Sentient diplomat. General Mauro had no time to spare for lectures, Idly he read the details of the topic to be covered. It seemed innocuous enough, an examination of Terran myths. The general called for the dossier of Dr. Skacsi.

Dr. Skacsi in his role as chief liason officer of the Sentient government to the occupation army, had admitted to Mauro that the Sentients were using a long-range, peaceful plan to swallow up their Terran conquerors. Personally, Mauro was quite content with a strategy that would take two centuries to carry out.

The dossier came in the form of a computer printout. It revealed that Dr. Skacsi had a medical degree but had given up his specialized practice of diagnostic ultrasonography for diplomacy. In addition, like most Sentient intellectuals, he dabbled in other things. He taught Terran literature at the Sentient University of the Arts.

His heavy cane was a personal symbol, a family heirloom of many centuries. Many of the Sentients carried similar canes. There were usually electronic circuits within to generate the strong magnetic fields that Sentients considered to be so healthgiving. General Mauro smiled at this ancient superstition. He closed the folder, leaned back in his old fashioned Terran swivel chair and closed his eyes. He was not a student of mythology, even within his own culture, but he did not intend to miss this lecture.

HE WENT to see Lata for the last time.

She seemed not to take notice of the star on each of his shoulders. He tried to make her comment on them, but she wouldn't.

"Do you see these multiplying?" he asked, pointing at one of the stars.

She shook her head silently and stared into the distance. Finally she spoke to him.

"Then our friendship is really over?"

He flushed at her directness.

"Not really. My affection is as deep as ever. But in view of the way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in which General Hinsley died, I feel that I must raise the office to new levels of integrity. Much as I hate to, I have to stop seeing you."

She would not be consoled. He tried to press a gift on her, placing on her throat a matched set of Terran pearls that glowed against her pale skin with the warmth of a hundred suns. But she took it off and handed it back to him.

On his way back to headquarters, he thought, "She *did* care for me after all," and found himself strangely elated.

The lecture was to be given in the great auditorium of the Sentient University of the Arts. Every seat was occupied and some were standing at the back. General Mauro looked about with simulated nonchalance, studying every face with great care. Apart from his adjutant, Colonel Spencer, who kept trying to suppress bone-cracking yawns, and a few of the younger Terran officers and enlisted men, virtually everyone in the hall was a young Sentient student.

The lecture was informal. Dr. Skacsi was seated on an elevated platform, his cane resting across a small table on which he had piled his notes. He spoke quietly but with an edge of humor. The acoustics of the hall were superb. Every nuance, every shade of expression in Dr. Skacsi's voice were apparent to General Mauro. Skacsi spoke in a literary form of the Sentient tongue and General Mauro took great pride in his ability to understand every word. He had spent interminable nights during the early years of the Occupation, in learning the Sentient language and learning it well.

Dr. Skacsi was focusing on Norse myths of Terra and relating them to the economic and psychological undertones of their times. If there were allusions to current politics, General Mauro could not detect them. He began to relax. Perhaps he had been paranoid in supposing there was an ulterior motive behind the lecture. The formal talk was over and there were many questions from the floor.

"What about the story of the Giant's Egg?" asked one student.

Dr. Skacsi stiffened and instinctively, the skin tingled along the nape of General Mauro's neck.

"I suppose," said Dr. Skacsi, "that you're referring to the invincible Giant of the North. He was impervious to pain, unaffected by fire and water. He killed without mercy. Many knights had tried to kill him and had instead been killed themselves."

The General's teeth clenched. If there was not a political parable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at hand, he would eat his braided cap. He braced for the rest of the tale.

"It seemed," said Dr. Skacsi, "that one could only submit to the will of the creature. A patriotic tailor, however, looked for some weakness in this giant. Months of observation gained him nothing. But one night, he saved an enchanted bird whose wing had been injured and this bird revealed the secret."

" 'The Giant,' said the bird, 'can only be reached through his heart. And that is not in his body. It lies in a distant place, within a cave. In that cave is a mighty dragon who guards a chest. In this chest is another chest and within that, a third. And in this last chest, lies an egg. And if you squeeze the Egg . . .' "

The General leaped to his feet and his adjutant followed suit as if on cue. Dr. Skacsi stopped for the briefest moment, then resumed his remarks. Without even nodding toward the platform, the General and his adjutant withdrew.

BACK at his office, General Mauro regretted his angry departure. He did not feel the lecture had been innocent but he regretted that he had lost his composure. How much did the Sentients know about the artificial heart system? There had been no references to it in any of the Terran medical journals; the procedure had always been kept secret.

But secrets were meant to be found out. He sent a personal invitation to Dr. Skacsi, asking him to his office for an informal chat. The elegantly attired Sentient emissary came at once, his cane crooked in his elbow. He appeared as courteous and imperturbable as ever. He sat down and placed his hand over the knob of his stick. The knob was superbly carved in the shape of some strange beast. The details were of precious metal. For just the barest moment, Dr. Skacsi's eyes rested on the large photograph on the wall behind General Mauro.

"Your predecessor was an interesting man," he said.

Mauro knew the jibe that lay beneath the seemingly innocent observation. He ignored it.

"General Hinsley was a man of certain weaknesses," he said. "But he was a patriot."

"We're *all* patriots," said Dr. Skacsi.

"I'll be direct," Mauro said. "Are you still committed to the long-range strategy you once outlined to me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We haven't changed our minds," the Sentient said. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," said General Mauro. "I thought you might have plans about squeezing the Giant's Egg."

"I would not squeeze the Egg if I could," said Dr. Skacsi. "I abhor violence."

The General sighed. What lay behind the verbal fencing? Was the Egg purely symbolic or did Skacsi know about the artificial heart system? It was all so futile, anyway. Both computers invulnerable to blast. Even their destruction would only cause minor inconvenience to those with artificial hearts.

"If I seem suspicious, I apologize," said the general. "My own feeling is that you would not. Perhaps I take myths too literally."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Skacsi.

The explosion destroyed the computer at Command headquarters. The bomb did not injure the computer, but a tunnel had been cut beneath the building and the blast took out the entire foundation so that the computer plunged deep into the gaping hole. The backup computer in the forest sector took over without a hitch. The general could not detect a single skipped beat in his own chest. But he was thunderstruck at this open attempt at murder. He had been a fool to listen to Dr. Skacsi.

It was almost with a sense of relief that he put his contingency plan into operation to counter the terror. He had never expected to have to use it, but he had thought through every detail, the restrictions, curfews and taking of hostages. He realized how subconsciously he had been contemptuous of the passive resistance tactics of the Sentients. He wanted an enemy he could fight and destroy.

This time Dr. Skacsi asked for the appointment. General Mauro was matter-of-fact at the meeting.

"I won't insult you by asking if you know anything about the bombing," he said with mock solicitude. "I know you abhor violence."

"Neither I nor the other leaders of the Sentient Council have given up our long-range plans," said Dr. Skacsi. "We consider terror counterproductive and know it will only provoke more violent terror in retaliation."

"You will understand my personal regret at doing this," said

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

General Mauro. "I am taking five hundred hostages from your student population. If another bombing attempt occurs, they'll be summarily executed. If you have the ear of any of the terrorists, let them know that I mean what I say."

"I do not have the ear of these fools," said Dr. Skacsi. "The contamination has come from your own culture. Our young people meet with your soldiers. They hear contempt for non-violence and have the Terran victory rubbed into their hides. They read your literature and see war glorified. And finally some of our finest youngsters have come to think that Terran ideas on war and insurgency are philosophically correct."

The general smiled sadly. He said, "It seems your long-range scheme has backfired. It isn't you who are absorbing us. The conqueror is swallowing the conquered."

The lines of Dr. Skacsi's mouth had turned downward. His supple skin was slack and the smooth forehead had furrowed into leathery seams. He leaned on his cane and pulled himself slowly to his feet, almost stumbling as he left the office.

The proclamations went up everywhere. At all of the universities, numbers were assigned by lot to the students. But when the numbers of the hostages were called, every student stepped forward. The General was angry but impressed. The students were brought to one central depot and the hostages were forcefully separated from their comrades.

The second blast occurred shortly thereafter. It tore away a gate in the forest sector but left the auxiliary computer unscathed. General Mauro personally surveyed the damaged site. The bombing had been almost laughably inept, but had to be dealt with firmly.

"What are you going to do?" asked Colonel Spencer. "Will we execute the hostages?"

"We have to," said General Mauro. "But before we do, bring Dr. Skacsi here. Perhaps five hundred lives will unclog his sources of information."

Colonel Spencer was uneasy.

"Why here?" he asked. "Maybe he knows less than we think he does."

General Mauro grimaced.

"More, if anything. I'll try to convince him of the futility of these bombings and how meaningless the deaths of the hostages will be."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The balloon of his artificial aorta pulsed in Colonel Spencer's chest. The general, he assumed, knew what he was doing. But he carried out his orders reluctantly.

WHEN Dr. Skacsi was brought before the General, he was a sorry sight. His frock coat was dirty and torn and there was a deep slash on his cheek. A greenish fluid seeped from the wound. Colonel Spencer carried the doctor's cane. The carved knob was off and within the hollowed insides, one could see an intricate network of components and terminals.

"We checked his cane," said Colonel Spencer. "It had a battery in the knob which energized a powerful, pulsed magnetic field generator inside the cane."

"I tried to tell him," said Dr. Skacsi. "My people once believed in the healthgiving properties of magnetic fields. My cane is just a family heirloom."

"I know that," said the general. "But Colonel Spencer couldn't take any chances. It might have contained an explosive device."

He turned to the colonel.

"Give the cane back to the doctor, but keep the battery and the knob."

Grudgingly, the colonel complied.

"Did you attempt to resist arrest?" asked the general.

"I refused to cooperate," said Dr. Skacsi.

He held his beheaded cane very gingerly and peered at the two dangling electrode terminals.

"Come close to the computer," said General Mauro. "I think you know what it's for. You talked about the Giant's Egg, once. Well, here it is. Squeeze all you like and nothing will happen. See this surrounding plastic frame? It's completely resistive to bombs."

"I abhor bombs," said Dr. Skacsi. "But I *have* known what this computer does for some time. There was a helibus accident several months ago and one of your staff officers was involved. Although I no longer practice medicine, in the emergency I was called to take ultrasonic holograms of the injured areas. Just after I had finished, Terran medical aides arrived and took the victim back to your own hospital. The holograms were left behind."

"Such carelessness was inevitable," said General Mauro bitterly. "Nevertheless, blowing up this computer, even if it *were* possible, wouldn't have harmed any of us."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Standby pacing," said Dr. Skacsi. "I surmised as much. Even if your signal is cut off, your artificial heart functions automatically."

"Then tell us who committed the bombings," urged the general. "If you don't, five hundred students will die needlessly."

It would be so easy, thought Dr. Skacsi. *The electrode terminals of my cane form a battery when placed in my blood. And the plastic shield that is impervious to bombs may be transparent to a magnetic field. Mine is not the heartbeat of the heart of a giant—it will confuse the giant and kill these Terrans.*"

"You won't understand me," he said aloud. "All my life has been committed to non-violent methods. We lost the war to you because we refused to fire on your fleets. And now you want me to choose between the lives of misguided fellow Sentients and innocent hostages."

He looked again at the clear plastic frame guarding the guts of the computer. He was one of those responsible for allowing the Terrans to conquer his planet. Had he been wrong after all?

"Shall I issue the order?" asked Colonel Spencer.

General Mauro sighed.

"I'll do it myself," he said.

"Don't," said Dr. Skacsi.

They were looking at him intently now, waiting for the names. Directly opposite him was the memory bank, billions and billions of tiny magnetic cells, set in a vast complex array of matrices. Almost as if in a dream, he raised the cane high and pressed the open electrode terminals deep into the gash on his face. The freshly activated blood cell energized the microcircuits of his cane, building a powerful, short-pulsed magnetic field. He pointed his cane forward, directly at the computer memory and out of the corners of his eyes saw the Terran officers fall about him.

Shutting off their computer couldn't have harmed them, he thought. *But magnetically scrambling the memory cells and mixing up the telemetered instructions—devastating!*

He was relieved, but he took no joy in what he had done. He would become a hero to the students now, and for all the wrong reasons. The dark gray uniforms lay in bizarre attitudes. He was almost happy when he saw a non-commissioned Terran officer, too unimportant to merit an artificial heart, come forward to smash in the top of his skull. ∞

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

 (Continued from page 4)

pheres of pressure at a normal temperature of 370°, the water vapor condenses every night in great drops which take the oxygen with them. The lowlands become rivers and seas, and the violent changes constantly undermine the planetary crust.

No man can exist in such a world. But a remote-control robot, built with immensely strong protection, is sent to the planet to find intelligent life. He finds it—but not among adults. He names himself Fagin and steals eggs to raise his own brood of young, giving them names out of Dickens.

The result isn't entirely happy. The children aren't human—yet they can't learn the traditions of their non-human ancestors.

When a human child and an extra-solar alien child from the observing ship are dumped into this weird world, Fagin needs all his human knowledge and all the wisdom of the natives to rescue the kids—if they can be rescued.

Even though one might not want to live there, Tenebra becomes a place we know. A fine story—I consider it below the best Clement has done, however, because the natives tend to play second fiddle to the humans. And, as Hal Clement knows, his mature humans tend to be wooden, his human children less so, and his aliens totally believable and delightful. In this, humans take up about half the story, which leaves us too little really alien development. We still have a fascinating puzzle, worked out with meticulous attention to scientific alien background.

Cycle of Fire came out originally in 1957 without prior magazine appearance, and has been unavailable since 1959. This always seemed to me a great pity, since it's very good Clement, though quite different from the majority of his stories.

This time, the planet is capable of supporting human life, though it is alien enough. But the center of interest lies not in strange atmospheres or conditions of xenogeology, but in the life-pattern of the natives. Unlike most Clement works, the aliens in *Cycle of Fire* not only have a disturbingly different way of seeing their world but also a highly complicated history.

The basic story is simple. A young man, Nils Kruger, is stranded on the alien planet and is surviving by a narrow margin when he meets a native who has crashed a glider. They are forced to travel together toward whatever destination Dar, the alien, was seeking.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Since Dar only knows the air route, the region of travel is unfamiliar to both of them, and the conflict of their attitudes toward even such basics as death develops strongly.

The natives seem to exist in at least two ecological niches on a planet that periodically turns from raving heat to moderate cold; and within each niche, there are apparently two separate ecological adaptations.

Ecology has become more routine as a source of fiction since Clement wrote this book. But *Cycle of Fire* remains near the top of all such fiction, because Clement never makes the mistake of taking the obvious answer. Dar's people are not simply reshaped insects who metamorphose, nor are they creatures who generally hibernate through the wrong season. In fact, they're not even what *they* think they are. It's convincing, and the ending is very much right for Dar, whatever Nils may think.

Perhaps therein lies the secret of Clement's success. Nils plays his part, but he's basically a human viewpoint for the study of Dar, who somehow always manages to hold stage center.

BALLANTINE Books has also reissued Clement's *Natives of Space* (75¢). This isn't a novel, but it contains three long novelettes from the early period of Clement's writing—and very good novelettes, at that. The first, *Assumption Unjustified* is a well-considered (though now somewhat unfresh) story dealing with aliens who are sent to observe Earth and find it progressing at a rather surprising rate. The second, *Technical Error*, is one of several stories based on a single idea and tried by different writers: given a ship built by aliens with alien technology, just what could human beings do in learning to use it—or trying to? Clement's story stands up better than the others, probably because he has gone more deeply into the science. But the final story in the book is the real payoff. In its day, *Impediment* was a milestone among stories about some kind of telepathy; it still is! Clement took a look at what we know about communication and what telepathy would have to be, if it existed. And here, his aliens are somehow very real, and the story has both an idea and an emotional content. It's worth the price of the book by itself.

ANOTHER reissue is *Shield* by Poul Anderson (Berkley, 75¢). In this case, there is far less justification for reprinting, since only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seven years have gone by since it first came out and since it wasn't really that good even then.

Generally, Anderson is one of our writers who can be depended upon to give us some extremely clear visions. He's usually meticulous about the accuracy of his science, and he can tie that very neatly into his plotting. But in this, the science doesn't really seem to matter much.

Koskinen comes back from Mars with a shield that can enclose a man in an impenetrable force field—the absolute defense against any weapon known to man. This had been developed by cooperation between the Martians and the expedition to that planet.

And with that, you've had all the real extrapolation, science and hard thought in the story. It's not that fresh a bit of business, either, since many from Jack Williamson to myself have used a similar gimmick, all with about the same amount of science (almost none) to account for how it works. And while there are a lot of hints about the Martians and their background, we never really get to know Mars, so it hardly could be considered anything but "business" to fill space.

Instead, we have a fairly routine chase story. Our hero has the gimmick with him, so the militant forces really ruling Earth (different forces for different countries, but all similar) try to arrest him. With the shield, he manages to escape to a sort of glorified Mafia hideout in this vague future world. There—aha—is a female who becomes partial to him, and when the hideout is attacked, he-she saves him-her thus-and-so.

They retreat to a place where old-fashioned airplanes are still being used as a bit of color for our future, and there they hole up while the military tries to bomb and lasar them out of existence. In the end, turns out the Regular Army are the good guys, so our friends are saved.

But since the young lady has been a b-a-a-d girl somewhere in the past (I think she took an apple from a snake, or forgot her fig-leaf or something), she is kicked out of salvation after all. Too bad—she was the only fairly interesting character in the book.

There are also all kinds of subplots and counterrevolutions and such throughout. It's a pity none add to the story—and a greater pity that a damned good writer like Anderson should be haunted by the reissue of something that was originally only intended for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a magazine story (I hope) and then was picked up by a hungry market.

Sometimes it seems that the good work writers do is interred ahead of their bones while the bad lives after them forever. Go buy a copy of Anderson's *High Crusade* or *War of the Winged Men*, if you want to see what the man can really do with a combination of science (sane or wacky) and strategy and characters and story. *Crusade* is a thoroughly logical story worked from a deliberately chosen piece of seeming impossibility, and will completely convince. *War* is another fine example of blending alien ecology with humans evolved in a mixed-up economic ecology.

BERKLEY Medallion Books isn't doing too well this month, now that I look at the publisher of *Operation Ares* by Gene Wolfe (75¢). This is a perfect example of how not to think out a future.

In a way, it's kind of a standard nightmare. Mankind has slipped from its present technological level, this time largely through takeover by a certain type of bureaucrat. We have Mars trying to help Earth by sending messages to which Earthmen are forbidden to listen. The population has dropped, and things have gone bad—it says.

To add to the horror, huge bands of savage predators roam around at night killing people. This takes place early in the book. I tried hard to find out from what the beasties evolved; but aside from something about zoos, I still don't know.

That sets the general level of convincingness. The Martians, who are human descendants, start a war to save Earth. They lose.

Essentially, there is no science in this book. There is no believable strategy of war, no consistent background that convinces me, and above all, no psychological insight that I can accept as applying to human beings, either singly or in the mass. There are quite a few words in the book, however, and they seem good words. If that's what you want for 75¢, it's your money.

ON THE other hand, once in a while a book comes along from which nothing really can be expected, but which turns out well done and pleasant. And that's a rewarding experience.

Kelwin by Neal Barret, Jr. (Lancer, 95¢) doesn't even look like science fiction. It has a badly reproduced (or minimum color reproduction) cover by Steranko, who shows considerable promise of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

becoming a real find; but this is all standard sword-and-sorcery routine, with the brawny hero swinging his two-handed thrust at the dirty villains, while far enough away not to show too much detail lies a comely and naked wench in chains—though pretty loosely bound to that tree, partner!

Although, nothing on the front or back led me directly to think there was a wizard hero, wizards do get mentioned, so we assume magic. And the whole package seems contrived to make us think that we have here another pale and paltry pseudo-Conan.

Strangely, the book isn't like that at all. Barrett has laid out a future world that has gone into nightmarish decline. He goes in for neither routine nightmare nor magic. His hero, Kelwin, is well chosen. He's an antiquarian and archeologist, who runs a shop only as a cover to his attempts to dig up the technological background men have lost. He is sent on a mission for soundly chosen reasons, with his own private reasons equally sound.

It's not a great book, but it's fun. The characters are acceptable and varied. The little science that is used is done well, without the cliché we all expect when the great weapon is unveiled. And while this future world is by no means complete, it isn't claimed to be. Barrett has sectioned off one small area, limited by the ability of men to get around without advanced technology, and has developed it well within those borders.

Kelwin is only marginally science fiction, but it has adopted all the attitudes of science fiction toward development of a not-now-true idea. And I much prefer that to something rattling around under the guise of a science-based future in which no two ideas hang together. It's worth at least the 20¢ more it costs than the two preceding books, in my opinion. ∞

SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW
P. O. Box 3116, Santa Monica, Cal. 90403

WANT A VIEW OF SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE INSIDE?

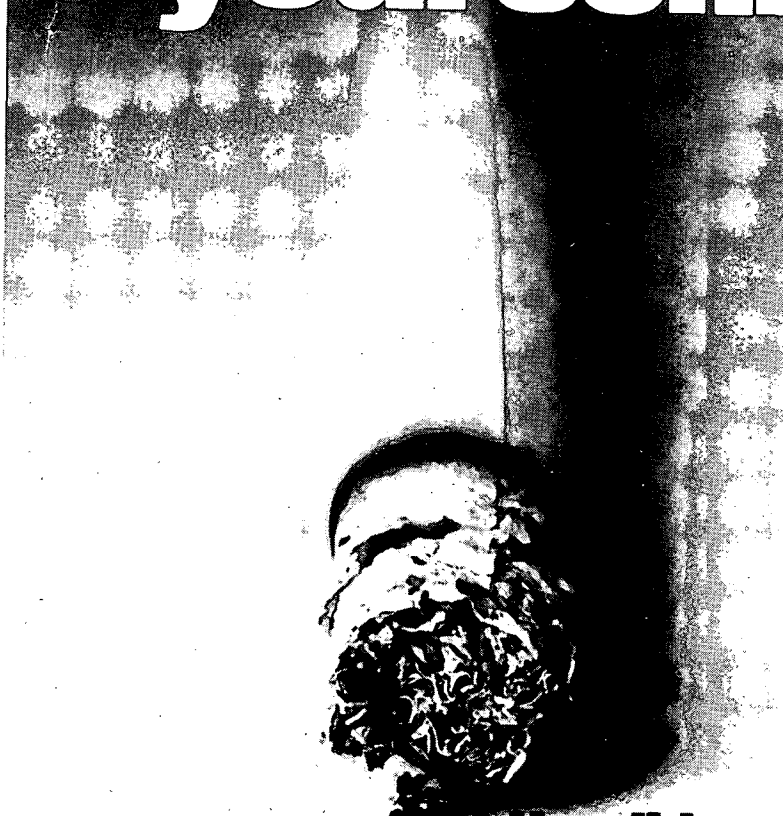
Featured in SFR No. 42 are two such views: *Science Fiction in an Age of Revolution* by Robert Silverberg, and *Open Letter* by Robert A. W. Lowndes. Also featured are *Off the Deep End*, a column by Piers Anthony; a major review by Norman Spinrad; humor by Greg Benford, erudition by John Boardman; madness by the editor—and fury by the readers in the letter column.

Sample Subscription—2 issues for $1. $4 per year.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THIS SPACE CONTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLISHER AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

One cancer you can give yourself.



Horrible isn't it?

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How's your Imagination Quotient?

Test yourself, then treat yourself to *3 volumes of fascinating mind-stretchers for just $1*

No one on your world has ever seen the stars. A strange legend foretells something called "night" will come tomorrow for the first time in 3,000 years. What will happen when it does?

You're the first astronaut to visit another planet. Your ship lands and you find the house you grew up in. The woman on the porch is your grandmother! What's the explanation?

A great starship suddenly confronts another ship from an alien civilization. Can either race be sure the other won't conquer his world? Is there an alternative to destroying each other?

You'll find the dazzlingly imaginative, beautifully logical answers in three famous stories in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*—an anthology of the greatest SF literature of all time. And you can have this 572-page, hardbound book—plus two more masterpieces of the world's most entertaining, provocative fiction—for just $1 plus shipping and handling. It's all part of the fun when you join THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB. The coupon tells how easy it is.

Science Fiction Book Club 22-S91
Dept. 13-GXX, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

Please accept my application for membership and rush the 3 books whose numbers I have printed below. Bill me just a $1.00 plus shipping and handling for all 3. Each month send me the Club's free bulletin "Things To Come" describing the two monthly selections and other book bargains. *If I do not wish to receive one of the two* monthly selections, or prefer an alternate or no book at all, I simply indicate so on the form provided. I pay only $1.49, plus shipping and handling for each book I take. (Occasional extra-value selections are slightly more.) I need take only 4 books in the coming year and may resign any time after purchasing 4 books.

NO-RISK GUARANTEE: If not delighted with my introductory package, I may return it in 10 days and membership will be canceled. I will owe nothing.

MR.
MRS. _____
MISS *Print name*

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

If under 18, parent must sign above. Office use only

Any 3 books for $1 with trial membership.

279. Science Fiction Hall of Fame, I. 26 "winners," chosen by Sci-Fi Writers of America. Ed. Robert Silverberg. Pub. ed. **$7.95**

804. The Year 2000, An Anthology edited by Harry Harrison. *Thirteen compelling new* stories on the quality of life 30 years from now. Pub. ed. **$4.95**

622. The Foundation Trilogy, by Isaac Asimov. The ends of the galaxy revert to barbarism. Pub. ed. **$10.50**

620. Childhood's End, by Arthur C. Clarke. Mankind's last generation on earth. "*Wildly fantastic!*" — *Atlantic.* Pub. ed. **$4.50**

796. Quest for the Future by A. E. Van Vogt. The electrifying adventure of the man who discovers immortality and the secrets of time.

615. Stranger in a Strange Land, by Robert A. Heinlein. He knew the Martian love secret —and it spelled his doom. Pub. ed. **$6.95**

637. The Left Hand of Darkness, by Ursula K. LeGuin. *Finding love—in a* "Unisex" world! Nebula Award winner. Pub. ed. **$4.95**

642. Stand on Zanzibar, by John Brunner. Life in U.S. 100 years from now. Hugo Award Winner. 600 pages. Pub. ed. **$6.95**

618. Dangerous Visions. Anthology of 33 original stories never before in print by Sturgeon, Anderson, others. Pub. ed. **$6.95**

602. ANYWHEN by James Blish. Seven strangely *compelling stories* with emphasis on our inescapable humanity. Pub. ed. **$4.95**

806. Beyond the Beyond, by Poul Anderson. 6 novellas by Hugo Award winner. About scientists, pirates, "loners."

807. Neanderthal Planet, by Brian W. Aldiss. 4 novella gems. Never before published in U.S.! Shrewd, witty, ingenious.

Book Club editions are sometimes reduced in size, but they are all full-length, hard-cover books you will be proud to add to your permanent library. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Toronto. Offer slightly different in Canada.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED